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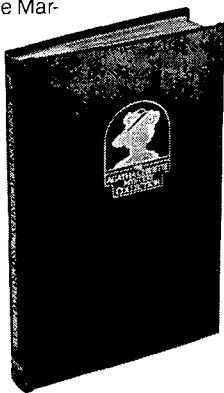
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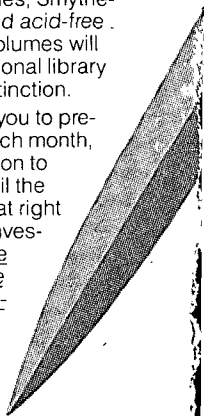
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The Christmas Spirit

by Thomasina Weber



I didn't realize anything was wrong until the little old lady in front of me in line began to cry.

"What were you doing while the boy bagged your groceries?" asked the cashier.

"I was getting my money together," said the customer, her voice quavery with tears as she

Illustration by Hank Blaustein

nervously snapped and un-snapped the catch of her shabby pocketbook.

"Can't you see this poor woman is upset?" I demanded.

"Do you have to be so rude?"

"Look behind you, sonny," said the cashier. "The line is backed up into pickles already. Go talk to the manager."

I am a journalism major here in Florida, and this little lady intrigued me because, based upon my skill in judging character, I plan to specialize in the real people behind the headlines.

"Come along," I said, leading the woman to the manager's booth, where he invited her to tell her story.

"After putting my change away," she finished, "I found that my groceries were gone. The bag boy said my husband took them out." I had seen the man—tall, thin, elderly, with an outstandingly hooked nose.

"And you don't have a husband," said the manager. I thought I detected a note of weariness in his tone.

"He died of consumption ten years ago, bless him." I had never heard of consumption, but I could readily see it might be a result of consumer frustration, which is certainly reaching epidemic proportions these days.

"It happens all the time," said the manager. "Husband waits outside while the wife shops and then comes in and grabs the wrong bag. Take a cart and refill your order."

"But I can't afford—"

"You already paid. Merry Christmas."

"Oh, thank you," she said, "and thank you, young man."

"For what?" I asked.

"For caring."

Well, after that, I could hardly walk out and leave her, so I helped her fill her cart. "You must eat an awful lot," I observed.

"I'm having a guest for Christmas dinner."

"I'll load the groceries in your car," I said.

"I didn't bring the car. I'm staying in the trailer park next door."

Over her protests, I drove her home. Her small travel trailer was old, but it looked sturdy and the tires were new. "Do you pull your trailer down here every winter?"

"Oh, heavens no! This trailer hasn't been moved in years."

"That's funny," I said. "The undercarriage is caked with road dirt."

She bent down to look. "Well, isn't that strange? I'll have to speak to the manager about that. I certainly wouldn't want anyone using my trailer when I'm up north. You know, I don't think he's the most honest person in the world." I got the shopping bags from the car.

"Just set them down, dear."

"I can carry them inside for you, Mrs.—"

"Posey."

"I'm Melvin Slater. I'd be glad to—"

She smiled at me sheepishly. "I didn't have time to tidy up this morning."

I left, wishing her a merry Christmas. It wasn't until I got back to my room that I realized there had been no car in her carport.

This is not the happiest day of my life, I thought the next morning as I rode the creaky elevator up to the seventh floor of the old building where my dentist has his office. If there is anything harder to do than winning a sweepstakes, it is getting a dental appointment at a time convenient to you, which is why I was still on campus while nearly everyone else had gone home for the holidays.

But I believe that everything happens for a reason, and it looked as though I was here to champion Mrs. Posey. There was a warm glow in the region of my heart.

Until I was sitting in That Chair waiting for the novocaine to take effect. The chair faced the window, permitting its occupant to gaze down at the main street below. I wondered how many others had sat here and contemplated jumping.

Suddenly a yellow pickup truck swerved to the curb and who should get out but Mr. Hooknose. He came up behind a girl in a blue pantsuit. After a short conversation, she entered the bank on the corner. Anyone who could steal food from a little old lady would not

stop at anything, I thought. What was he planning now?

I was considering leaping out of the chair and dashing downstairs—white bib and deadened jaw notwithstanding—when the man returned to his truck and drove away. The dentist chose that moment to enter the room.

When he finally finished with me, I hurried to the bank in the hope that someone would recall seeing the girl and could identify her for me.

I got the shock of my life when I saw her in a teller's cage. "Who was the man in the yellow pickup truck that you were speaking to?" I asked.

Her eyebrows rose. She was a well-preserved thirty, but I didn't hold her age against her. "You must have the wrong person," she said, smiling.

"Oh, no, it was you." I returned her smile.

"Why do you ask?"

"I—uh—I thought I recognized him."

She straightened a stack of currency. "I speak to a lot of people." Then, her glance going beyond me, "May I help you, sir?"

Her character wasn't hard to read, I mused as I left the bank. A beautiful face, a sweet smile, and a gentle, considerate way of telling me to mind my own business. Perhaps I had been too forthright.

I drove to the trailer park and

knocked on Mrs. Posey's door, but there was no answer. The adjacent window was open and a small gust of wind lifted the curtain. I saw a pipe in an ash-tray on the table.

"Melvin?"

I turned guiltily to see Mrs. Posey holding a basketful of wet laundry. She set it down and seated herself on a deck chair, motioning for me to do the same. I was going to mention the pipe, but actually, it could belong to anyone—a friend, a neighbor—who knows, even to Mrs. Posey herself, what with woman's lib and all.

"I thought you'd like to know that I saw the man who stole your groceries."

"Oh?"

"He was talking to a teller at the bank."

"The poor man probably needed those groceries."

"His truck is practically new."

"Maybe that's all he owns."

"Speaking of trucks, Mrs. Posey, where's your car?"

"My car? Why, it's in the repair shop." She tucked a stray hair behind her ear. "Melvin, please forget about the groceries. It's the Christmas season and we should be charitable."

My admiration for her altruistic attitude battled with my love of justice. "But people who get away with petty thievery go on to bigger crimes," I said.

"I don't feel I have the right to pass judgment on anyone, Melvin."

Something in her tone made me bite back my reply. Her dress was faded, her shoes, run-down. A picture was beginning to form, and I did not like it one bit. How could I have been so wrong about her?

"Mrs. Posey, through your window, I saw a pipe." She averted her eyes and I knew I was on the right track. "You do have a husband, and he drives a yellow pickup truck." I waited for a denial, but none came. "The two of you have found a way to beat the high cost of living."

She raised teary eyes. I felt like a rat. "We don't have much money, Melvin. We scrimp all year so that we can come to Florida to spend Christmas with our daughter."

"The bank teller."

"Yes. She has no idea what a financial hardship it is for us."

"Why doesn't she go up north to be with you?"

"She doesn't care that much."

Another misjudgment: daughter was not sweet and gentle at all. I sighed. "But, about the groceries—"

"That little ruse keeps us alive while we're here. The supermarkets can afford it." She must have sensed my thoughts. "We don't eat very much, and

we'll be leaving the day after Christmas."

I went back to my room, wishing I had never met Mrs. Posey. She had no right to leave it up to me whether to report her or not. I vacillated between pride at having figured out their racket and disappointment at my failure to read her character correctly, a fact that could threaten my entire career.

I felt sorry for them, yet they were breaking the law. But if I reported them, I would ruin all their Christmases as well as my own. After much soul-searching, I finally decided just to go home tomorrow, as planned.

The next morning I headed for the trailer park to give Mrs. Posey the good news about my decision.

Her trailer was gone. I looked at the empty space in disbelief and barely heard a neighbor telling me they had pulled out the previous evening.

The guilt came while I was filling my gas tank. Worried over whether I would turn them in, they had hitched up and left, foregoing Christmas with their daughter, the whole purpose of it all. Much as I hated the thought of facing their daughter, I felt obligated to apologize.

There was an empty space in front of the bank, and as I drew abreast of the car parked ahead of it, the driver turned to look

at me, her engine idling. It was the Posey's daughter. I was so surprised to see her that I had to make a second attempt at parking.

Just as I opened my door, two figures in stocking masks dashed out of the bank and into her car, their arms loaded with bags. Stunned, I watched as the car screeched away from the curb. One figure was tall and thin and its stocking mask did not fit flat against the face as did the mask of the short, dumpy robber. Mr. Hooknose and Mrs. Posey; and, of course, daughter Posey. Helpless little old lady and sweet gentle daughter—some judge of character I am! I stared glumly at the steering wheel, picturing my career as an in-depth journalist in ruins. This was surely the lowest point in my whole life.

"Hey, buddy, open up!"

I looked up to see a policeman at the window. I had not even heard the cops arrive.

"Did you see anything?" he asked.

Suddenly the sun came out. Of course! My reason for staying here was not to help Mrs. Posey with her Christmas plans, but to show me where my *real* talent lay—not in personalities, but in detection! *Melvin Slater, Ace Crime Reporter.*

"Yes, officer, I saw the robbers. I'll give you their complete descriptions—"

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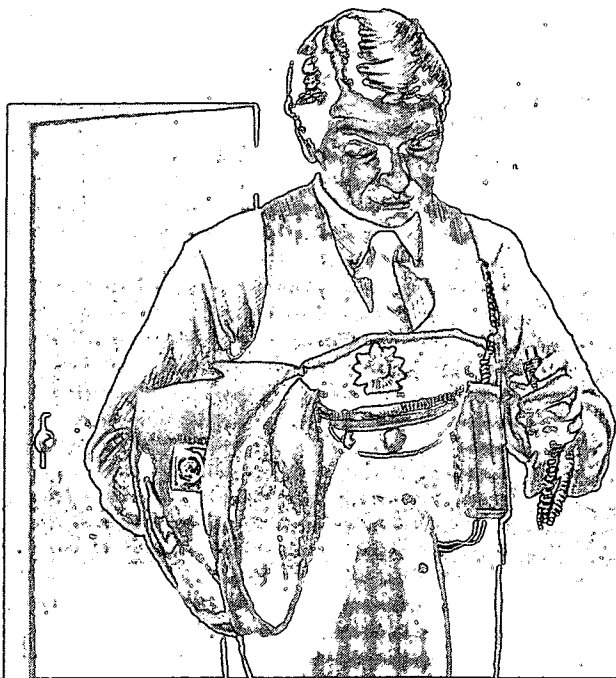
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FICTION

Dead Man's Switch

by Bill Crenshaw



Security in the building was good, better than Aikens had expected, and he took some pleasure in that, not only because he was good too and prided himself on rising to challenges and winning, but also because the harder the problem, the more he had to concentrate, and the more he had to concentrate, the less chance he had of going crazy, which is where he thought he was going to go if he couldn't get to the upper offices and make Wilbur back off.

He could get in and out of buildings easy and without leaving any two witnesses who could agree even on height, and he had double-suited before, that was no problem, but it wasn't enough this time. This time he wanted to show off to himself, needed to

Illustration by Nick Jainschigg

prove his control, so this time he triple-suited, getting inside the building in Mike's Meats coveralls, authentic down to the frayed cuffs, carrying a clipboard as he followed some seconds behind the real delivery man, asking breathlessly which way they had gone.

Under the coveralls he wore a Southern Security uniform, complete with an empty .38 high on the waistline.

He left the staff restroom of the fifth floor four-star restaurant as a security guard and worked his way up at a leisurely pace.

Under the uniform he wore a seven hundred dollar pinstriped three-piece suit. He'd be wearing that when he saw Wilbur, and in the suit he also wore a small tape recorder and a tie-tac mike and a surprise. He looked fifty pounds heavier than he was, but his movements were natural and sure with no hint of stiffness. He had practiced. He could triple-suit in Atlanta in August without sweating.

He could have gotten into the Omega Building simply by registering as a guest in the hotel wing or wearing his three-piece up the glass elevator to the executive offices, but neither route would have led very far and he needed access to the service elevators and back hallways he had studied so carefully in the assessor's office, and he needed the challenge, the fear, the possibility of getting caught, the possibility that kept him sharp. Because it was possible to get caught, he wouldn't.

And he knew, of course, that he was walking into a trap. The newspaper story was too obvious, had to be a plant, bait to lure him to Atlanta, to this building, to the thirty-eighth floor, to Wilbur. Aikens was counting on the trap. He'd use Wilbur's trap to trap Wilbur.

Darlene didn't understand, was afraid, had tried to talk him out of it: She'd jumped cities five times with him and would again, she said, would do anything, go anywhere to be with him, touch him, love him. Darlene didn't understand that he had been running for her and that in a way he was going for her so that they could stop running, could stop sleeping with a hand under the pillow on his squatty .32 automatic. They'd done that for five and a half months now, five and a half months of hell, and Wilbur was the devil. Had to be Wilbur, no question. Who would have thought that he would keep looking during all these years, but who else could it be? Hadn't Wilbur already tried to kill him, grabbing a cop's pistol on the courthouse steps after the verdict? Hadn't he seen the look on Wilbur's face as the cops wrestled him down? Had to be Wilbur,

and after six years Wilbur still meant business, and for a businessman, business was business.

So Darlene should understand that he was doing it for her, too, but she didn't, or if she did, she didn't care. She was afraid to let him out of her sight, like he would disappear or something.

"We can leave the country," she'd said last night, her tears hot on his chest.

"He found us in Tijuana. He'd find us again."

"Oh, Avery," she'd whispered in that throaty husk he loved, "I wish you hadn't croaked his kid."

And Aikens had gotten mad at that. He hadn't croaked the kid. The kid had died. It wasn't the same thing.

He was sorry about the kid—that hadn't been part of it, and it wasn't his fault, as far as he could see. When an eight-year-old starts talking about being sick and having diabetes and giving himself shots or he'll die, you got to figure that it's one of those stories that talk shows are always telling you to make up in case you get kidnapped or something, like telling women to ram their fingers down their throats and vomit on the alleged rapist or say you've got AIDS or something. It was all part of the same scam, Aikens thought, that kept guys like him down and out and guys like Wilbur up and in. He felt in his own way that the kid had died on purpose just to get even with him, just to spoil all that money.

Something was always spoiling things for him, Aikens thought. Every time he hit the number, somebody sucker-punched him. He'd been so careful with the kid, taken time for details, never showed the kid his face, hadn't left a trace of hard evidence that could link him to the snatch. He'd even used the kid himself to give instructions on the phone so they couldn't record him or voiceprint him or anything. And then, as soon as he gets the money almost, he sees that the kid is out cold and he reads in the paper that the kid never woke up, just kind of drifted on off wherever you go. After all that planning, he dies and spoils it, just like something always did.

Even Darlene. He'd hardly found her when something tried to ruin it. Darlene, good God almighty, Darlene, what could explain that? Here he was finally, with a woman who loved him, really loved him, not just any woman, but a real woman, beautiful, and she didn't love him because of his money, which he'd been careful not to tell her about too soon, or because of his connections, which she didn't know about, but because of him by himself, who he was.

She'd do anything for him, in bed or out. She needed him, clung to him like her life depended on it, like a drowning woman, but she was strong, too, he could tell that, feel it under that soft skin, strong like steel, or he wouldn't bother with her.

And just when she had changed his life, the Wilbur thing began. A couple of phone calls that were dial tones, a sympathy card in the mail, then a whistle-smoke bomb under the car, keyed to his ignition. Kid's trick. Any little twerp in the neighborhood could have done it. But the message was clear—this could have been a bomb, Aikens. He didn't need a picture drawn, he could see the writing on the wall. Somebody was playing cat and he was the mouse and he knew that sooner or later the cat gets tired of playing and bites down hard. What the hard part was was waiting for the bite.

But he could wait. He could play the game with the best. Except for Darlene, she couldn't, she was his weakness now, which was maybe a coincidence. "Or maybe," he told Darlene as they stared from their bed to the car lights swinging across the brick wall of the building across the alley, "maybe it's a sign of Wilbur's hate that he watched and watched until I had more to lose than money or living, until I could lose somebody else, and then he knew it was time to take what he thought he was owed for his boy." Darlene had kissed his cheek gently, and they made love, and that had made it worse somehow because then he worried what if they shoot me now.

Aikens resented her at times for making him weak, vulnerable in ways he had not imagined he could be. He found that the razor's edge was more frightening than exhilarating; he lost sleep, lost weight, lost, he thought, hair. His hand trembled; it never had before.

He whimpered in his sleep, good God almighty, whimpered, she said, what kind of man does that? But he could still take it, he told himself, didn't like running but could run forever if he had to, or as long as the money lasted. But then they'd tried to snatch Darlene.

He had been sleeping fitfully, wrestling with formless nightmares, waking suddenly as he realized that the scream was not in his dream. He had slammed into the hallway yelling and firing his pistol at the ceiling, heard a sudden sob from the stairwell and heavy footsteps running down, leaned over the rail to see Darlene hunched below him, clinging to the banister, a thread of blood at

the corner of her mouth. It was the blood that got to him, made it real. He helped her back up the stairs, snarling at the half-faces at the half-opened, still-chained doors. He had washed her mouth as if she had been a child. They had skipped town that night, and on the road at four in the morning, Aikens realized that he had decided to turn his back to the wall and fight.

Then there was the picture in the paper and Wilbur in Atlanta, just two and a half hours away from where they were in Greenville, South Carolina, Wilbur moving his home and offices into the newest Atlanta multi-tower, moving jobs and money to Georgia. It was an invitation, regrets only. Aikens thought, *No regrets*, and found as he planned that his hand stopped trembling, and only then did he realize how much all of it had gotten to him, and when he realized that, he smiled.

There was always a chance that the newspaper story was not an invitation, was just a coincidence, and that Wilbur would be in a building with serious security, so he had triple-suited just in case. And if it was an invitation, if Wilbur did want to see him, then he could get in easy, but then a trap would be waiting for him, so he had triple-suited for that, too, playing it straight because you're never wrong playing it straight, being careful, watching your back. Check all the angles; never be surprised. That's where the dead man's switch came in.

He stood in front of the service elevator on the twelfth floor, hitching his thumbs in his belt as he'd seen security guards do, rocking back and forth on his heels, lips pursed as if whistling a tune to himself. A secretary clicked down the hall, brisk and efficient even as she left for the day. He touched his glossy visor with two fingers as she passed. "Have a good weekend," he said. She ignored him. He pursed his lips and pushed the up button again.

He got off the elevator on the twenty-seventh floor and turned left to the restroom where he had hidden a briefcase in the suspended ceiling the day before. He checked the stalls. Empty. He locked himself into the last stall, stood on the toilet, and pushed the panel aside, waving away the tiny brown fibers that floated suddenly around his face like gnats. He retrieved the briefcase, then took off the security guard uniform and stuffed it in the ceiling. The briefcase was empty, a prop needed only because it would be conspicuous in its absence. He put a couple of rolls of toilet paper inside to give it some weight so that it would move right. Attention to detail, mind the little things because the little things will trip

you up. He hefted the briefcase. It felt right. Then he checked the bomb.

He wore two small but sufficient charges, one in each inside breast pocket of his suit jacket. They were wired through the lining to a battery pack in his left lower pocket and wired from there through the lining down his left sleeve to the dead man's switch made from a home video game joystick. The joystick tube would fit concealed in his hand, his thumb constantly depressing the rewired firing button. After the bomb was armed, it would explode if he released that button, like if he died suddenly. Dead men tell no tales, but he'd take Wilbur out with him if Wilbur tried anything.

And Wilbur would know that, of course, at the right time.

Aikens had no intention of blowing himself up. He had too much to lose. But he knew he couldn't fake a bomb, danger gave the edge, he had to know he could blow up for real. Acting isn't the same as real. And anyway, this was insurance, a deterrent, a policy of mutually assured destruction that guaranteed the safety of all involved. Nobody was supposed to die. That was the point.

He grimaced in the mirror at the ceiling fibers on the shoulders of his suit and used the hot blast of air from the upturned nozzle of the hand dryer to help brush them off. Someone came in, grunted a greeting. He grunted back, combing his hair, then left.

He knew he looked the executive type because anybody looked the executive type in pinstripes and razor cut hair, like in that magazine that took bums out of flophouses and gutters and dressed them up like company biggies and if they kept their mouths shut who could tell? He walked with leisurely purpose, deliberate but relaxed, confident, preoccupied with important matters. Wilbur's office was glass fronted and dead ahead at the hall junction, and the secretary was taking her own sweet time about leaving, he'd be there before she was gone.

"Goodnight, Mr. Wilbur," he heard her call as she turned back toward an inner door. "Have a good weekend." She dawdled and he got to the junction before she left and he turned right at the junction and hoped that she would turn left, toward the nearest elevators. She did. When he heard the elevator's *ding*, he turned back, started the tape recorder, and walked straight into the offices of M. J. Wilbur and Associates as if he had an appointment, which he thought he did.

There he was, sitting under a hot white cone of light from his

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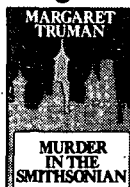


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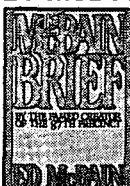


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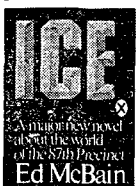


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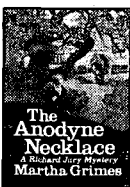


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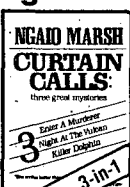


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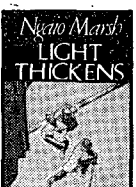


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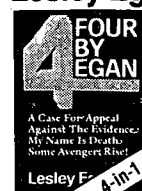
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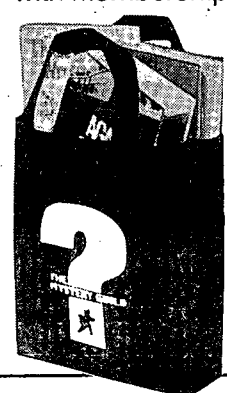


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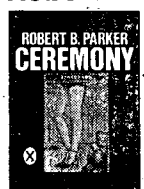
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desk lamp, hunched over some folders. He was careless, or pretending to be, not looking up, just keeping on keeping on. Aikens didn't shut the door.

"Something else, Vicki?" said Wilbur.

Aikens said nothing, waited, concentrated on breathing slowly and looking cool, all business. Wilbur finally raised his head, looked over the top of round half glasses. Aikens hated glasses like that, weak glasses, booky glasses. Glasses like that invited trouble.

"Did Mrs. MacDonald let you in? Do you have an appointment?"

Aikens tensed as Wilbur turned to his left, reached for a fat black pen with his left hand, ran it down his appointment calendar. Aikens watched every move, every hint of motion, might be a gun in the drawer or a call button under the edge of the desktop, or it could be just what it looked to be. Aikens was ready to move fast, but he wanted a clear read on Wilbur before he said anything.

Wilbur turned from his calendar and looked back over the top of his glasses. "You'll need to call Mrs. MacDonald on Monday for an appointment. Please shut the door as you leave." He bent back over his folders.

Aikens wasn't buying it. He could see that Wilbur wasn't reading, really, could see his fist wrapped around that fat pen, could see sweat bead in the glare of the desk lamp. Wilbur was nervous, too fidgety, dangerous. Aikens knew it was his turn to move. He decided to go direct.

"Cut the crap, Wilbur," he said. "You know who I am." And he stayed frozen, this was a flashpoint, he'd called a bluff and anything could go down, he was ready. If Wilbur moved for a gun, he'd be out the door before Wilbur popped off a round and he'd go straight to the cops with the tape, what an irony. But if Wilbur had just wanted him dead, he could have had that wish long ago, so Aikens was betting no gun, not yet, still cat and mouse. Both men were stone, eyes locked, Wilbur squinting against the glare.

"I know who you are," Wilbur said. There was Muzak from somewhere. Wilbur didn't move.

"I'm going to sit down now," said Aikens, nodding toward the leather chair in front of Wilbur's desk. "You just sit still." He shut the door and crossed to the chair, eased into it, and set the briefcase down on the floor to his right, watching Wilbur all the while. The silence continued. Aikens felt good, felt that adrenaline rush, that edge. Everything was sharp. He smiled.

"What do you want?" asked Wilbur.

Aikens could almost see the venom in his voice, and he let his smile widen. "That's my line," he said. "What do you want? Why are you hounding me?"

"Why shouldn't I just call security and have you thrown out?"

"Because you went to so much trouble to get me here."

"You're crazy."

"Do it, then," said Aikens, waving the back of his hand toward the phone as if dismissing it. "Call."

Aikens didn't like hitting another flashpoint so soon, liked them spaced regular and three or four minutes apart at least so you could gauge the stakes better, see what the other guy was hoping to win and was afraid to lose. Then you knew what to do. But this was coming too quick, before he got a handle on Wilbur, and the whole idea was to get something on tape that he could use as blackmail, use to force Wilbur back into his high rise and off the streets, back where he belonged.

And he could tell that whatever Wilbur had expected from this meeting, if Wilbur had in fact set up this meeting, whatever he'd expected, this wasn't it, because he was fighting for control, working his jaw muscles, white-knuckling that pen, tensing his arm muscles. Wilbur wasn't dealing with this well at all.

Who am I kidding? thought Aikens, because he could tell that he wasn't dealing with it well either, that the euphoria that had been building ever since he had decided to confront Wilbur was draining fast, leaving him empty, like a sucked orange. Only the dead man's switch left him in control of anything and that was because the dead man's switch controlled ultimately, like doctors and lawyers and judges and such controlled ultimately, because they could control somebody's life. It was bottom line control, the kind that Wilbur would understand, and it was all Aikens had, and as long as he had the dead man's switch, he could hold on, but he had to leave the office sometime and when he did he had to know that the nightmare with Wilbur was over, because that's what it was, a nightmare, he could admit that now as he sat on what seemed to him the peak of an ice mountain, tilting down toward the beginning of a long slide, because it *was* a nightmare and he couldn't live it any more, so one way or the other Wilbur would quit or he would go crazy.

He felt light-headed. He had to regain control.

"You should know," he said, halting involuntarily when Wilbur's eyes snapped into focus on him, "you should know that I'm wired

with a dead man's switch and that if anything happens to me I'm wearing enough black powder to put this office out into the street." He held up his left hand to show Wilbur the joystick and the mashing thumb.

And Wilbur just sat there a minute or two it seemed like and looked from Aikens' eyes to his thumb and back again, which was not at all the reaction Aikens wanted. Then Wilbur started smiling like the smile was coming on his face whether he wanted it to or not and he picked up a paper clip in his right hand and kind of flipped it backhanded with his index and middle fingers at Aikens' head, and he said, "So let it go."

"Hey!" said Aikens.

Wilbur flicked another paper clip at him. "Come on, let it go." He flicked another; Aikens flinched aside; Wilbur picked up a pencil. "Let it go, Aikens."

"Don't push me," said Aikens, reaching for his briefcase, "or I will."

Wilbur laughed aloud at that and threw the pencil spinning like a knife. It bounced off the briefcase that Aikens raised suddenly between them. Wilbur reached for a stapler.

"Hey!" Aikens shouted and twisted out of the chair. The stapler scarred the leather cushion.

"Let it go, Aikens. You can do it. C'mon." He threw a coffee mug. It caught Aikens in the left shoulder. Aikens ducked and a second mug crashed into the wall beyond. He crouched behind the chair, shaking with anger and confusion. Wilbur was crazy, would get them both killed. A fat book arced high over the chair like a mortar shell and smacked down beside him. Did Wilbur think this was some kind of game?

"Let it go," Wilbur squealed through his laughter.

Aikens sprang to his feet, enraged, afraid. "It's a dead man's switch, you idiot," he shouted. "If you want me to let go, you'll have to kill me."

Wilbur's laughter roared back. "Oh, macho," he hooted. "I love it when you're macho." And he threw a glass paperweight with a piece of pink coral embedded inside and it hit Aikens on the left wrist and it was all Aikens could do to keep his thumb down. With his right hand he reached into his coat and ripped at the wires until he pulled one free of the battery.

"You're crazy," he said and turned and started for the door, heard the drawer slide open, knew that Wilbur had pulled a gun even

before the porcelain lamp by the door broke and sagged and shattered as the bullet passed through.

"Sit down," said Wilbur. He was holding a pistol, a .32 it looked like. Aikens sat, wondering if the shot had been loud enough to attract security, hoping that it had been. This wasn't right, none of it was right, he had only come to get the man to leave him and Darlene alone and now he might be killed. He'd been counting on not being killed, on confronting the little man with the big bucks one-on-one without the goons he hired to do his hassling, but this wasn't part of it. He hadn't even brought a gun himself, Darlene had said no guns, that was just asking for trouble, and he had agreed, but he hadn't told Darlene about the dead man's switch or she wouldn't have let him come at all. And now he didn't have the dead man's switch and he didn't have a gun, and there was nothing that even resembled euphoria left.

Wilbur leaned forward across his desk, deep into the white cone of light, and laid the gun down just in front of his right hand. "Now," he said, "what do you want?"

Aikens knew that this was a different kind of flashpoint, that it was his turn now, that he had to seem in control even if he were not. He had a goal; he had to concentrate on that, on not only getting out alive, but on getting Wilbur to quit, and he had to concentrate on Darlene or he might be stupid and he couldn't afford to be stupid now. Still, the gun was there, three, maybe four feet, a good lunge and grab and he'd be back in control, but it was only six inches from Wilbur, nothing doing yet.

"Well?" said Wilbur. The tone lacked patience.

"I came to get you to back off," said Aikens. "Leave me alone. I didn't have nothing to do with your kid. I can understand how you feel about him, but I didn't do nothing, you know? I mean, I know my life hasn't been what you'd call straight, but it's been business, like yours, business, and in business you protect. I'm big on protection, and even if I had snatched your kid, which I didn't, you understand, though I'll admit I've considered that kind of job, even if I had snatched him I'd protect myself and the way to do that is to protect the kid, right? I mean stands to reason, 'cause you get busted for snatching that's one thing, but if somebody dies, that's something else, isn't it?"

"Murder."

"Yeah, right, who needs that? I'm in it for the money, you know, and I'm not greedy, so I don't do jobs that might have murder

connected. I understand your grief, Wilbur, I do, and I know that you need somebody to blame, and that's me, because I work the other side of the street and things looked suspicious about me for a while there, but like the judge said, there was no connection between me and the kidnapping, which was why he threw it out. And I know it's the other side of the street, but it's the same street, if you know what I mean, only maybe on my side we call spades spades."

It was the silence that Aikens feared most now, so he filled the air with his voice, trying to sound calm, but pleading a bit, just enough, he hoped, to let Wilbur get the idea that Wilbur was in control now, that Aikens was at his mercy, and yet showing too a bit of independent spirit because if Wilbur was like him at all, he didn't respect things soft, like slugs, and would just as soon squash them as not. Things had to have a hardness somewhere or they didn't deserve to live, so maybe the kid should have died. Wilbur should see that, but people like Wilbur and Aikens and Darlene should live because they had that hardness somewhere at their core. Wilbur had to respect that.

But he also knew that Wilbur might be crazy, probably was, so maybe he couldn't count on him to respect a hardness at the core; maybe he wanted Aikens to crawl like a slug, and Aikens didn't think he could do that, even if it meant not ever seeing Darlene again, good God almighty, Darlene, if only he'd listened to her, if only he could see her again. What was this macho crap anyway? He could have popped Wilbur himself, except that he might take a fall for it and he'd lose Darlene anyway, so he didn't. Everything he had done for six months had been for Darlene. He needed her. If only he knew what Wilbur wanted to hear, he could tell him.

"So," he continued, "I don't think you ought to bother me any more or kill me."

Wilbur just sat there, in that cold white cone of light, the shadows in his eyes deep in the sockets. "I wish I could kill you," he said, "but I can't. I tried to once more after the courthouse steps. I guess you should know that. I was going to get you during a transfer like Ruby got Oswald, but they kept putting the transfer off and I thought about it more and more and realized . . . a lot of different things. That I might hit someone else, for one thing, some poor cop who hated you as much as I did, or who didn't hate you at all, perhaps, but who was just doing his job. What if I hit him? And I also realized those clichés. By realized I mean I fully understood

them intellectually and emotionally, here and here." He touched his head and his stomach with a forefinger. "You have to experience these things, perhaps, to understand these clichés fully. Isn't that ironic? The clichés are supposed to substitute for that experience, but without the experience, they're relatively meaningless."

He broke off, staring blankly before him. Aikens wanted him to keep talking, this was exactly the kind of stuff he could take to the cops, a threat on his life, and he could ditch the blasting caps and black powder and batteries before he went to the cops and claim that he'd only taken the joystick as a bluff because he feared for his life. He needed more, but this was a good start.

"What clichés?" Aikens asked.

Wilbur answered without changing his position. "Killing you wouldn't bring my boy back. Two wrongs don't make a right. Revenge is not justice. That sort of thing. They're true. So finally I realized that I couldn't kill you."

For the tape, Aikens had to ask it. "Then why'd you just take a shot at me with that .32 automatic?"

Wilbur's eyes snapped up again and into focus and he smiled slightly. "I didn't want you to leave," he said. He smiled more broadly, inviting.

Aikens smiled back. "You know," he said, "phone calls and nasty letters and smoke bombs in my car and trashing my room and rocks through windows is one thing. But when you get rough with Darlene, that's something else. You of all people I know should know how it is when an innocent person gets hurt, even if I had been the one who kidnapped your son, I mean, which I wasn't."

"My wife died, did you know that?" said Wilbur. "About six months after the trial. Just died, got sick and died. Now why do you think she did that?"

There was no answer to that, Aikens knew. That was an accusation, dangerous.

"I'm sorry about your wife, truly. If you knew me, you would know that I wouldn't wish bad on anybody."

"Oh, but I *do* know you, Aikens," said Wilbur, rocking back a little in his chair, a little out of the cone of light, a little away from the gun, teasing. "I know everything about you. I know what you eat for breakfast and how often you brush your teeth. I know what beer you like and how you like your sex and how you make little noises in your sex and in your sleep. I've even got some of those little noises on tape. Would you like to hear them?" He rocked

forward and punched a button on a cassette recorder. "You know, most people are surprised when they hear themselves on tape. They don't sound like themselves, often don't even recognize themselves. See what you think."

Aikens recognized himself, himself and Darlene, and that meant that this son of a bitch had invaded every aspect of their lives, every little corner of their privacy, of their brains. Whatever he felt inside him he couldn't name, but it was white hot and moving fast. And Wilbur was tormenting him again, laughing at his helplessness, his impotence, he was right in front of the guy and there was nothing he could do because Wilbur was leaning across the desk and the gun was closer to him and Aikens would just have to take it if he ever wanted to see Darlene again.

"Who'd you get to climb out of the toilet to record that?" he snarled, his voice quaking. "You can always find somebody who'll do anything for money, no matter what kind of scuz job it is, can't you?"

"I think we understand each other at last, Aikens, I really do." And he rocked back again in the chair, and Aikens had the gun in his hand before the springs even squeaked good.

"That's it, you bastard," said Aikens, grinning; with the gun pointed at Wilbur's guts. "I can tape, too, and I've got all of this on tape myself, and I'm going to the cops. Won't that be a fine how-do-you-do when this scandal breaks, wiretapping, spying, threatening, pulling a gun, assault and battery with intent. This is going to look real fine. And me and Darlene will be laughing all the time."

"I hardly think so," said Wilbur from the shadow beyond the cone. "I know more about you than you do me. I know you killed my only child. I know you got away with it because you're so very good with details, because there's no evidence to link you to your jobs. I want you punished, and I know what will punish you, besides the jail term you'll be serving soon, I mean. What will punish you is this. I hardly think you and Darlene will be laughing together any more. No, I haven't killed her. I've merely paid her. She works for me. A thousand dollars a day for the last half a year plus a fifty thousand dollar bonus if only one of us leaves this room alive. You're quite right. There is always someone who will do anything for money."

"You're lying," said Aikens; but there was a cold growing outward from his center.

"No, I'm not, as you'll realize when you think about it. Nothing else makes sense. These are her reports." He swept his right hand over the folders on his desk. "She made those tapes. Take it all with you. She finds you quite disgusting; by the way."

Aikens leaned way across the desk and fired once. Wilbur flinched in the shadow, then he smiled and rocked forward into the light, onto his desk, dead.

Aikens fought for control, fought not to run. Wilbur was right. He was careful. He had just screwed up, but he was careful, could make up for it now. Good thick walls and closed solid doors, Wilbur's shot at the lamp wasn't heard, hadn't brought help; neither would his. He had time to wipe fingerprints, to take the tapes and reports, which couldn't be from Darlene, the bastard was lying and deserved what he got. Time to clean up all the evidence, to walk away clean. Make it look like a suicide. He'd fired close enough to leave powder burns on the shirt, he could wipe his prints and wrap Wilbur's fingers around the gun. The cups and paper clips and paperweight would look like they'd been thrown around by a man depressed enough to kill himself maybe. It would work.

Aikens opened his briefcase on the desk and stuffed in the tapes and folders with the toilet paper, moving quickly but carefully, a good rhythm, not stopping to see if they could be from Darlene because they couldn't be, it was just Wilbur baiting him, tormenting him, pushing, almost as if he had wanted to be shot.

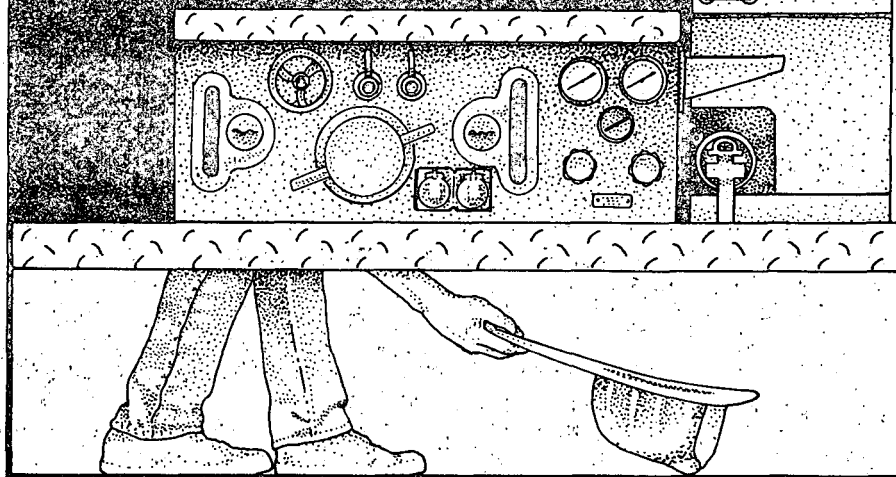
He moved around the desk to the body, wiped the gun clean with a Kleenex, held it by the barrel with the Kleenex and reached for Wilbur's hand. Which hand? Details, pay attention to details. Was Wilbur right- or left-handed? He'd thrown things with his right but he'd held that fat pen in his left. Left hand, then.

Aikens reached across for the left hand and noticed several things at once, noticed that the fat black pen now lying on the blotter before Wilbur's cupped left hand wasn't a pen at all, looked more like his joystick than a pen, right down to the button on top of the barrel, and he realized that the gun he was holding was in fact his own gun, the one he'd left with Darlene, and just as he realized that the fat pen was a dead man's switch wired to an alarm, three Southern Security guards burst in wearing their .38's high in their hands.

He wondered for an instant if Darlene would be waiting when he got out, but then the completeness of Wilbur's revenge crushed down upon him.

Down the Road in Old Number Seven

by Ken White



They should have scrapped the truck a year ago. It would have saved everybody a lot of grief.

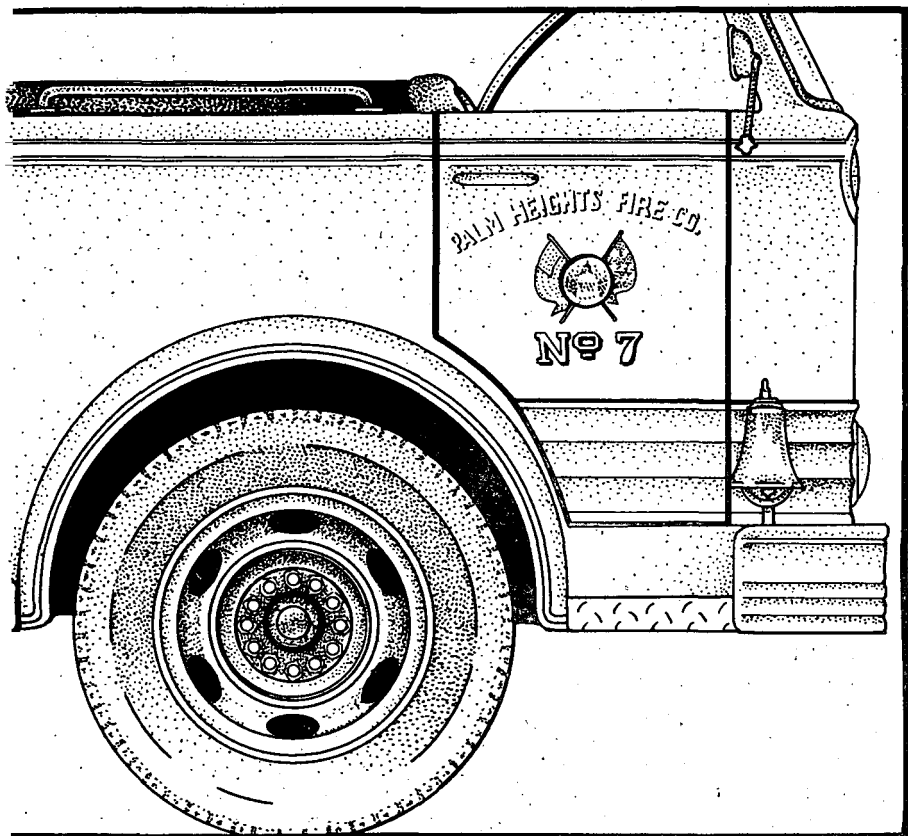
But old fire trucks seldom die; they just get passed from hand to hand. That's how we ended up with Old Number Seven.

Old Number Seven wasn't

Illustration by Glenn Wolff

old as fire trucks go. As Barry Wilkes said to me one day, "It's not old if you consider how long there have *been* fire trucks." He had a point. But Old Number Seven was on the high side for a first line pumper.

She'd been a beauty when the Highfield Beach Fire Department bought her in 1963. A



bright new seven hundred and fifty gallon per minute GMC 5000 pumper. For almost fifteen years, Old Number Seven had carried the designation "Engine One" in Highfield Beach. But then the wealthy citizens of Highfield Beach decided that their fire department needed a more modern first-out

pumper. So they purchased a fifteen hundred gallon per minute American LaFrance Century pumper, and Engine One became Engine Two. A year later, Engine Three.

Finally Chief Morse at Highfield Beach decided that Old Number Seven wasn't worth the room she took up in their

station, and he sold her to us for twenty-five hundred dollars. Twenty years after she rolled out of the GMC plant in Michigan, Old Number Seven found her final home with the Palm Heights Fire Department.

We called her Old Number Seven even though there was no New Number Seven. The name seemed somehow appropriate. Palm Heights needed a second line pumper for the main fire station, and Old Number Seven fit the bill. She was a little sluggish, and the guys on duty sometimes complained that they weren't getting the water out of her that they should, but she did the job.

The morning Old Number Seven gave up her secret, my shift was sitting in the kitchen at the main station having breakfast. The other two shifts prefer to take their meals individually, but we eat all three meals together.

Wes Collins, the department mechanic, was there, carrying a big bag of doughnuts he'd bought for the guys on duty. He was a nice kid, about twenty years old, whose only desire in life was to be a firefighter. But Wes was terribly nearsighted, and state regulations wouldn't allow us to hire him as a firefighter because of his poor vision. He'd begged Chief

Davidson for a job around the station, any job, and when the department had an opening for a mechanic, the chief hired him. Wes pumped gas at a local gas station during the day, then worked on our fire trucks in the middle of the night. He always ate breakfast with the shift coming on duty in the morning, listening intently to the war stories that were tossed across the table. Most were exaggerations, but Wes soaked them all up with an eager grin. I often wondered which Wes wanted most: the hard work of fighting fires or the easy camaraderie of men who have to live together one day out of three.

"Hey, Wes, what's the deal with Seven?" Gary Clinton asked, his mouth stuffed with eggs. "It's still not putting out enough water."

Wes smiled and shrugged, his eyes huge behind his thick glasses. "I tore the pump apart last week, Gary. There's nothing wrong with it. Captain McMasters says the truck's just getting 'old.'" He looked across the table at me. "Right, lieutenant?"

I had to smile at that. Wes had attached himself to Archie McMasters, our senior training officer, like a lost dog. I think Archie tolerated Wes because he was so anxious to please. But to Wes, Archie was God. "She's

getting old, all right," I said. "When things get old, they don't work like when they're new."

"You ought to know, Daryl," Wilkes said, staring intently at the piece of toast he was buttering.

"Real funny," I muttered. It wasn't. The average age of the men on my shift was around twenty-three. I was pushing thirty-five. Sometimes it felt like fifty.

The fire bell began to ring, and the kitchen emptied in seconds. While my men got into their gear, I went into the dispatch office.

"Warehouse, 2230 Milburn," the dispatcher said, phone cradled on his shoulder. "Flames showing."

I nodded and trotted back into the truck bay. "Fully involved warehouse," I called. "Kelly with me in Rescue. Turner and Seiden in Engine Seven. The rest of you on Engine Five."

As Todd Kelly drove us out, I looked over my shoulder and saw Wes standing in the empty bay, watching us leave. There was an odd, sad expression on his face, like the look a puppy gives you when you walk away.

I had the microphone in my hand as we made the turn onto Milburn. "Rescue to all units. We have flames through the roof. Engine Seven, take the

south exposure. Engine Five, take the front with us."

There was a crowd of people in front of the Kale Furniture Warehouse as we pulled up. They were all watching the fire. I jumped out of the truck and yelled, "Anybody inside?"

An older man in a suit detached himself from the group and walked up to me. "All the employees are accounted for," he said.

"Who're you?"

"Abe Kale," he replied. "My brother and I own the store."

"Any flammable liquids stored inside? Cleaners, solvents, gasoline, anything like that?"

He shook his head. "A couple of cans of furniture polish," he said with a crooked smile.

I turned to the men climbing off Engine Five. "Lay in two streams." I looked over my shoulder. Kelly was still standing next to the rescue truck. "Get the ladder truck over here. Have them set up on the north and hit the roof."

He nodded and leaned into the cab, reaching for the microphone. I jogged past Engine Five. On the south side of the building, I could see Mark Seiden at Old Number Seven's pump panel. Tommy Turner was manning the hose.

"Any problems, Mark?" I called as I approached. He was new man on the shift, still on

probation, and this was his first major fire.

"No problems, lieutenant," he said, grinning widely under his yellow helmet. "Boy, this is great."

I had to smile, remembering my first big fire. "Just keep your eyes on that pump panel," I said. "I'll get Kelly over here to run a line to the hydrant."

"Sure thing, lieutenant," he said, still grinning.

I started for the front of the building. Almost simultaneously I heard the pump change pitch and Turner call, "I got no water!"

By the time I'd spun around, Seiden had cut back the throttle and was on his knees, looking under the truck for a break in the line from the water tank to the pump. I ran up to the pump panel. The tank suction valve was pulled out. The gate valves were open. But the discharge gauge read zero.

"I don't know what happened, lieutenant," Seiden said, rising to his feet. "The discharge gauge dropped like a stone."

"What the hell's going on?" I heard Turner ask from behind. I ignored him.

"Maybe we lost prime in the pump," I said to Seiden. "Reprime it."

He turned the prime valve. The pump continued to whine.

I shook my head. "Okay, shut it down."

"Shut it down?" Seiden's mouth was open.

"Not much good if you can't get water out of the truck, Mark," I said calmly. "Drop the hose and take Seven back to the station. Engine Two can use the hose lay when they get here."

We had the fire under control within the hour and I was able to pull most of my units out by ten, leaving two men behind on Engine Two to handle hot spots. Mark Seiden was waiting in the bay when Kelly backed us in.

"It wasn't my fault, lieutenant," he said as I dropped out of the truck. "I swear." There was honest fear on his face.

I took off my helmet. "Of course, it wasn't," I said.

"Then you gotta tell Captain McMasters," he said quickly. "He's been on my tail since we got back. Says I'm gonna be fired."

"Where is he?"

"Over in the other truck barn," he said, licking his lips. "You'll tell him, won't you? Tell him it wasn't my fault."

"I'll take care of it," I said through gritted teeth.

Each shift had its own training officer, but Archie McMasters supervised all of them. And Archie was in charge of testing.

He used his position to ter-

rorize the men, especially probationary firemen. Archie would continually threaten to send them "down the road," as he put it, if they didn't do well on their probationary test. It was a threat he'd made good on more than once.

Archie's attitude came from the fact that he didn't like the new, educated breed of firefighter that was joining the department. When he'd become a firefighter almost thirty-five years earlier, the primary qualification was a cool head. You learned on the job. Now he was dealing with what he saw as kids who had learned their firefighting from books. Archie resented them bitterly.

I stomped into the big metal truck barn next to the station, still wearing my turnout gear. Archie was standing in front of Old Number Seven, a scowl on his face.

"What's the problem, Archie?" I asked, keeping my voice calm. "You're riding Seiden kind of hard, aren't you?"

Archie was a short, wiry man with crewcut grey hair. He looked over at me and spat on the floor. "Little weasel," he said. "Screwed up the pump on this truck, that's what the little weasel did."

"It wasn't Seiden's fault," I told him, my face inches from his. "The pump just shut down.

The tank outtake's probably blocked with rust."

Archie looked away. "I'll bet that little weasel did something to it," he said. "Wes works his ass off on these trucks, but those little weasels are always screwing things up. Don't know what the hell they're doing. That's the problem with book-smarts, Daryl." He spat again. "That little weasel Seiden better watch out. His probationary test is next shift."

"He's a good man, Archie," I said, putting a hand on his shoulder. "A little green, but he's got a good feel for things. You should have seen him when the water stopped. By the book, Archie. I couldn't have done it better myself."

He was staring at the cab of Old Number Seven. "You know, I was the first man to drive this truck to a fire," he said softly. "Nineteen sixty-three." He shook his head. "Boy, was she a beauty back in those days. Engine One, Highfield Beach Fire Department."

Archie had been a lieutenant with Highfield Beach until he punched out his captain at a fire scene one day. The captain had sent a firefighter alone into a burning building to look for occupants, and the man never came out. They fired Archie the next day. A week later, we hired him.

"She's an old truck, Archie," I said. "Old trucks break down, no matter what the mechanic does."

"When they got little weasels driving them they do," he said.

I sighed. "Look, I'm sure it's just rust blocking the outtake. When my guys are cleaned up, we'll pop the hatch and check inside the tank."

Archie acted as though he hadn't heard. His mind was twenty years away, when Old Number Seven was gleaming and new, when Archie Mc-Masters was young.

Seiden was waiting for me. "Did you talk to him?"

"Don't worry about it," I said, pulling off my turnout coat. "He'll get over it. He always does."

As I climbed out of my turnout pants, I heard Chief Davidson's voice over the P.A. "Lieutenant Northport to the office." I cursed and slipped on my boots.

The chief and I have a peculiar relationship. He and my daddy grew up together in Nebraska and were in the same Marine platoon in the Pacific during World War II. After the war, they drifted apart, but when I left home and moved to Florida, Daddy told me to see Carl Davidson about a job. I took his advice and I've been here since.

"What happened to Seven?" the chief asked as I walked into his office.

I sat down on the corner of his desk. "I think the tank outtake's blocked, probably with rust."

"What about your man Seiden?"

It was obvious he'd been talking to Archie. "Seiden handled it by the book, chief," I said. "I would have followed the same steps."

The chief snorted. "That's not saying much," he said with a smile. "Okay, what are you going to do about it?"

I looked at my watch. "Well, as soon as I finish my little chat with you, I'll take my guys over there and get inside the tank."

"Don't let me stop you, Daryl," the chief said, picking up a newspaper.

I grinned and hopped off the desk. In the doorway, I stopped and turned. "Uh, chief?"

He looked up. "What is it now?"

"Paper's upside down, sir."

The ashtray he threw missed my head by at least three inches.

Mayflower had driven Old Number Seven out of the barn and drained the tank. He and Muldoon pulled the center section of hose off the hose bed above the tank and removed the wooden slats covering the hatch.

I motioned for Muldoon to join me on top of the tank. He watched as I took out the bolts holding the hatch flush.

"You want me to go in, lieutenant?" he asked.

"That's the general idea, Sean."

He licked his lips. "I'm not being insubordinate or anything, but why me?"

I freed the last bolt. "Because you're a midget, Sean," I replied with a smile. "Little guy like you should feel right at home in there."

His face turned red. At five three, Muldoon took a lot of ribbing from the other guys on the shift. "Aw, lieutenant," he muttered.

I grabbed the edge of the hatch. He took the other side. We lifted.

The stink from the empty tank was unbelievable. An empty tank on a fire truck has a stench all its own, a mixture of stagnant water, corroded metal, and rot. The smell coming out of Old Number Seven's tank was all that and more.

Muldoon was holding his nose. "Jeez, lieutenant," he said, his voice distorted. "Do I really have to go down there?"

I nodded, smiling. The other men clustered around the truck were laughing.

"Can't I wear an air pack or something?"

"Just get down there, Muldoon," I said, handing him the flashlight.

He sighed, took the flashlight from my hand, and lowered himself into the tank. "The outtake's at the left front," I said as his head disappeared through the hole.

"God, it stinks in here," he said, his voice echoing hollowly inside the tank. "Okay, I'm going through the first baffle..."

The laughter stopped suddenly when Muldoon screamed. We could hear him scrambling around inside the tank, slipping on the wet steel. "What's wrong?" I asked, leaning over the hole.

He exploded up out of the tank, knocking me aside, and fell on his back, his face white. "Oh, Jesus Christ," he moaned. "Jesus Christ."

I held his shoulders and shook. "What happened, Sean?"

Muldoon was jerking in my hands like a beached fish. Suddenly he wrenched himself free, leaned over the side of the tank, and threw up.

I picked up the flashlight and swung my legs into the hole. Muldoon grabbed my arm. "Don't go down there, lieutenant," he said, his voice hoarse. I shook him off and dropped into the tank.

The inside of the tank gleamed

wetly in the flashlight's beam. The baffle, designed to keep the water in the tank stable while the truck was moving, was a foot in front of me. I crept forward on hands and knees, breathing through my mouth. The smell in the tank was unbearable.

I hesitated for a moment in front of the cutout in the baffle, then inched forward and shone the flashlight inside the forward compartment.

It's funny. My first thought was, "What the hell is Casaloni doing in the tank? They fired him two weeks ago." Then I realized that Casaloni *wasn't* in the tank. At least not all of him. Just his head, poised on top of the outtake hole like a bowling ball on a pedestal. His eyes were open and he was grinning. I backed away and stood up.

I didn't make it to the side of the truck before I lost my breakfast.

I was sitting on the edge of my bed in the bunkroom when he came in. "Hello, Tom," I said.

Detective Sergeant Tom Reynolds sat down on the bunk next to me. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm okay." I stood. "God knows I've seen worse." After a pause, I said, "It was Casaloni, wasn't it?"

He nodded. "Everybody who's seen it says yes."

I felt a shiver go through my body. "Was the, uh, rest of him in there too?"

"No," Reynolds said after a moment's silence. "Just the head." He was silent again, then added, "His head wasn't the only one. We found three others."

"Jesus," I muttered. "Any idea who?"

He shook his head slowly. "They were pretty well decomposed. The medical examiner says the oldest one has been in there maybe a year."

"About the time we got the truck from Highfield Beach."

"That's what your chief said. You have any ideas, Daryl?"

"About who did it?" At his nod, I said, "Well, I don't like to say it, but everything points to somebody in the department. I mean, it could be an ex-fireman, somebody who used to work here. But I don't think so. Those trucks aren't easy to get to. There's fifteen firemen wandering around here in the daytime. And Wes comes in after midnight to work on the trucks."

"Wes?"

"Department mechanic. A real straight kid. Hell, you know him. He pumps gas at a station across town. Big kid with real thick glasses."

Reynolds nodded. "Okay, I

know who you're talking about. You say he works on the trucks after midnight?"

I held up my hand. "Hang on, Tom. Wes is okay. A little over-eager sometimes, but like I said, he's a real straight kid. Anyway, he and Casaloni were buddies."

"Who else would have access to the trucks?"

I shrugged. "Between six in the evening and midnight, the duty crew is usually inside the station. We don't go out to the main barn unless we need a truck for a fire. Anybody who works here knows that."

"Great. So I've got about sixty suspects."

"Fifty-seven," I said. "If you assume that the chief, the assistant chief, and the secretary didn't do it." I laughed harshly. "They didn't like Casaloni. That's why they fired him. But I don't think they hated him enough to . . . to . . ." I had a sudden image of his grinning head and gagged. "You know," I said softly.

The door behind me banged open and Archie came into the bunkroom. He saw Tom and grinned. "Hey, Tommy," he said. "What's the good word?"

"No good words today, Archie," Reynolds said, looking away. I knew that Reynolds didn't like Archie. So did Archie, and he took perverse

pleasure in being extra friendly with Reynolds.

"Hell of a thing about Casaloni, wasn't it," Archie said as he dropped onto one of the bunks. "I should have known that little weasel would come to a bad end. Wasn't worth a damn around here, that's for sure."

It had been Casaloni's failure on his probationary test that caused the chief to fire him. A test Archie had given.

Reynolds looked at his watch. "I better get back out there, Daryl," he said. "How about meeting me in your chief's office about two. I got a few more questions to throw at you."

I nodded as Archie said, "Hey, Tommy, I'll leave. Don't want to interfere with important police business." He was grinning humorlessly.

"That's okay, Archie," Tom said. "I've got to make a few calls." With a final nod in my direction, he left the bunkroom.

Archie was staring at the slow-closing bunkroom door. "There's another little weasel," he said, the grin fading fast. "Takes a couple of courses in criminal science and thinks he's J. Edgar Hoover."

He turned to me. "They sent Muldoon home. I thought the boy was a little tougher than that."

I winced. "Archie, the only

reason I didn't go home was because Danny's on vacation and they'd have to call in another officer."

"Maybe I thought you were a little tougher, too," Archie said. "Hell, Daryl, you've been called out on accidents a whole lot worse than that. And then come back to the station and eaten a big supper."

"Yeah, but I knew Casaloni. I worked with him."

Archie shrugged. "He was a little weasel, nothing more. He didn't know piss about the trucks, didn't know his way around town, and he came unglued at a fire scene. We don't need firefighters like that. So we sent him down the road."

"Yeah," I said, starting for the door. "Only thing is, he didn't get too far, did he."

The guys on the shift were all in the kitchen, but none of them was eating. They sat around the table, reading or staring into space.

When I went in, Mayflower looked up. "What's going on, Daryl? The chief told us to stay here until the cops had a chance to talk with us."

"I know about as much as you guys," I said.

"Any word on who the others are?" Turner asked.

"It might take a while, but they'll find out."

Clinton dropped the maga-

zine he was reading and shook his head. "I guess this solves the mystery of why we couldn't get enough water out of Old Number Seven. The nozzles were getting clogged up with . . ."

"Yeah," I interrupted quickly. I saw that Seiden was studying a town map. "Getting your streets down, Mark?"

He nodded. "I ran into Captain McMasters a little while ago. He sort of suggested that I study, since my test is next shift."

"Have you talked to the chief about that guy, Daryl?" Wilkes asked. He smiled at Seiden. "It's bad enough that he eats rookies for breakfast and lunch. But I've been here almost five years. I know my stuff. I'm not one of his 'little weasels.'"

"Archie been bothering you?"

"Little stuff before today," Wilkes said. "You know, just needling. But today, after you went back to the bunkroom, he grabs me and throws me up against the wall. Tells me that since I do the truck check on Old Number Seven, I should have realized that something was wrong and reported it." He shook his head. "Daryl, how often did I report a water supply problem on that truck? I must have told Wes five, maybe six times. Everybody told me the truck was getting old, that you

couldn't expect it to pump like a new truck."

"It's just Archie being Archie," I said.

Wilkes shook his head again. "I don't think so. I think he's on the road to Breakdown City, if you know what I mean."

"I'll have a word with him, Barry," I told him. "That's all I can do."

I left the kitchen, heading for the other truck barn. Halfway there, the fire bell sounded: I spun and ran into the dispatch office.

The chief was standing behind the counter next to the dispatcher. "Division of Forestry says we've got about fifty acres burning out west of town off State Road 15. Take two brush trucks out of this station, and we'll roll another from Station Four."

"You want me to stay here?"

He shook his head. "No, if that brush fire starts to spread, we'll need an officer on the scene. McMasters is here if we need an officer on another call."

I didn't like the idea of leaving Archie in command, but it wasn't the time to argue. I went out into the bay. "Kelly and Turner, Brush Three. Seiden with me on Brush Two. The rest of you stay here for another call."

I was taking Seiden for two reasons. First, I wanted to see

how he'd handle himself on a good-sized brush fire. And second, I didn't want to leave him with Archie.

The brush trucks were parked in the big barn. As we climbed into the trucks, I looked over at Old Number Seven. Tom Reynolds was standing on top of the tank, looking down into the open hatch. He glanced over at me as we pulled out of the barn, his face expressionless.

The fire was really ripping when we pulled up. I put Seiden on the platform at the front of the truck, manning the hose, and started for the head of the fire, Brush Three right behind us.

For almost two hours, I forgot Casaloni while we fought the fire. There was a steady twenty-five-mile-an-hour wind that kept switching directions on us. Every time we thought we had the head knocked down, the wind would shift, and we'd scramble to get in front of the flames.

Kelly brought a tanker up, and while Seiden filled Brush Two's tank, I saw the chief's car pull up behind the tanker. Archie McMasters climbed out of the car in full turnout gear. He was grinning.

Before I could open my mouth, Archie said, "Chief wants you back at the station. Right now." He watched Seiden filling the

tank and laughed. "Good. I'd like to see for myself how the little weasel handles himself on a fire scene."

"Take it easy with him, Archie," I said, narrowing my eyes. "He's doing okay."

Archie walked past me. "We'll see," he said.

I took my helmet off and got into the car. Backing out, I could see Archie standing over Seiden, watching. Smiling.

Wes was coming out of the station as I drove in. He saw me and came over to the car.

"Hi, lieutenant," he said, smiling shyly.

"Hi, Wes," I said. "Hey, I wanted to tell you I'm really sorry about Casaloni. I know you two were pretty tight."

"Yeah," he said, the smile fading. "I was wondering what happened to him. I tried to call him the last couple of weeks, since he got canned, but he was never in his apartment." He shook his head. "Now I know why."

I patted him on the back. "There's nothing I can say. Sometimes things just happen."

"It's a funny thing, lieutenant," he said. "Since I found out, I keep thinking that if Frankie had done better on the test Captain McMasters gave him, if he hadn't been fired, maybe he

would have been okay. This wouldn't have happened to him." He looked at me, eyes distorted by the thick glasses. It looked as if he'd been crying. "Does that make any sense to you?"

I looked away. "To tell you the truth, none of this makes any sense."

"It wouldn't have happened to me," he said quickly. "If I ever had the chance to be a firefighter, I'd study my ass off. With Frankie, Captain McMasters didn't have a choice. But I would have worked hard. Captain McMasters wouldn't have sent *me* down the road."

Usually I found his obsession with being a firefighter kind of funny, if a little pathetic. However, considering the circumstances, Wes was making me uncomfortable. "Listen," I said. "I have to get inside. The chief wants to see me."

"Sure, lieutenant, sure." He smiled again. "See you tomorrow morning."

Tom Reynolds was sitting in the chief's office, waiting for me. The chief stood behind his desk, his face calm. "Shut the door," he said.

When the door was closed, he pointed to a chair in front of his desk. I sat down.

"Before Sergeant Reynolds talks to you, I want you to know that he has my full approval," Davidson said. "I won't have

this kind of thing in my department. One way or another, we're going to find whoever did it."

I nodded and looked at Reynolds. He stood. "You're a reserve police officer, Daryl," he said. "When you're on duty, you have the full powers of a police officer in this town."

I nodded again. Since my wife had left me, I'd filled the empty times riding as a reserve with the Palm Heights Police Department. It didn't pay anything, but the money I make as a fire lieutenant is more than enough for one.

"As of right now, you're on duty as a reserve police officer any time you're on duty with the fire department. Chief Davidson has authorized you to bring your service revolver with you when you're here."

"Great," I said. "You want me to wear it on my belt or what? Be kind of hard to get to if I was wearing my turnout gear." I shook my head. "Of course, I could always wear it outside the gear. The public would love it. Start a new fashion trend in firewear."

"Cut the crap, Northport," Davidson said sternly, but Reynolds held up his hand.

"Look, Daryl," he said. "I don't like this any more than you do. But the fact remains. Everything points to a member

of this department. We need somebody to keep his eyes and ears open around here. We can't put somebody in undercover for obvious reasons. You're the logical choice."

I sighed. "Look, Tom, I don't mind nosing around, seeing what I can come up with. Believe me, I want this guy too. But why the gun?"

"So you don't end up like Casaloni," the chief said.

"You don't have to keep the piece with you," Reynolds said quickly. "Stick it in your locker or something. We just want you prepared if something happens and you have to go up against this maniac."

I turned to the chief. "You go along with all this?"

He nodded. "I never liked Casaloni," he said. "The kid wasn't cut out for the fire service. Had he passed his probationary test I would have let him go anyway. But..." He spread his hands. "If there's a dangerous nut loose in this department, I want him found before something else happens. If the sergeant's suggestions will accomplish that, I'm behind him a hundred percent."

"Okay," I said, looking back at Reynolds. "What else?"

"On the off chance it is an ex-fireman with a grudge against the department, the chief's given me a list of men who've been

fired over the past two years. We'll be checking them all out." He looked away. "For now, there's two men I'd like you to keep a close eye on around here."

"Who?"

"Archie McMasters and Wes Collins," he said.

"Now wait a second," I said, leaping to my feet. "You're on the wrong track, Tom. Just because you don't like Archie..."

"No, you wait," Reynolds said angrily. "My personal feelings about McMasters don't matter. You heard what he had to say about Casaloni back in the bunkroom. I've talked to some of the men on Casaloni's shift. McMasters rode that kid unmercifully. From what I hear, McMasters hated him."

"That's just Archie being Archie," I said, realizing that I'd used the same defense with Wilkes earlier. I also remembered what Wilkes had said. Breakdown City.

"I don't care," Reynolds said. "Watch him. That's an order."

"Yes, sir, Sergeant Reynolds," I said harshly. "I assume there's a reason for watching Wes?"

"Opportunity," Reynolds replied. "He's over in that barn almost five nights a week while everybody else is asleep. Plenty of time to open up that tank and drop something inside."

"Wes?" I asked, laughing. "The same Wes who just came out of this office about ten minutes ago?" I shook my head. "The kid idolizes firefighters, Tom. Hell, we get an all-day brush fire, he takes time off from the gas station and brings us food, coffee, water, you name it. Sometimes for ten, twelve hours at a stretch. Not to mention the fact that he and Casaloni were close friends."

"You'd be surprised how quickly friends can become enemies," Reynolds said.

"Wes was broken up over this," I said. "Even you could see that."

"Why don't leave this investigation in my hands. I don't tell you how to put out a fire; don't tell me who is and isn't a suspect in a multiple homicide."

"Anything else?" I snapped.

"Watch yourself, Daryl," Reynolds said, staring at me hard. "You're treating what I've said like it was some kind of joke. That's a bad way to look at things. I'd hate to see something happen to you."

"So would I," I said. I looked over at the chief. "You have anything else for me?"

"Captain Raymond will be back next shift," Davidson said. "I called him back early. That'll free you up."

"Right," I muttered. "For my

other duties." I nodded to them both and left the office, slamming the door behind me.

I could hear the engine roar of the returning brush trucks and went outside in time to see Archie back Brush Two into the main barn. A moment later, he came out of the barn and walked past me without saying a word.

I started for the open doors. Halfway there, I met Seiden. The kid looked awful, covered with soot and sweat. His eyes were wide and he had a good-sized burn on his left cheek.

"Lieutenant," he said, his voice breaking. "You've got to help me, lieutenant." His eyes were filling with tears. "Captain McMasters just tried to kill me."

"Calm down," I said. "What happened?"

"You have to do something, lieutenant," Kelly said, coming up behind Seiden.

"What happened out there?" I asked Kelly.

"McMasters nosed the front of Brush Two into a hot spot," Kelly said, looking down. He paused, then said, "From where I was, lieutenant, it looked like McMasters cut the pump on Mark."

I turned to Seiden. "Is that what happened?"

Seiden nodded, closing his eyes. "The captain was riding me, calling me a scared little

weasel. Then he drove right into the fire. When I turned the nozzle on the flames, I didn't have any water."

I looked back at Kelly. "You're sure it happened that way? You know you've got to let the fire get close before you knock it down."

Kelly was shaking his head. "The fire wasn't moving, lieutenant. McMasters drove into it."

I sighed. "Todd, go tell the chief that you're taking Seiden to the hospital. I want that burn looked at right now."

"He's crazy, lieutenant," Seiden said. "He wanted to kill me."

"Do it now, Todd," I snapped.

Seiden stood silent, eyes closed, hands hanging loose at his sides. "Relax, Mark," I said. "We'll get you over to the hospital and take care of that burn. Does it hurt?"

"What did I ever do to him, lieutenant?" Seiden asked. "How come he wants me dead?"

I didn't have any answers.

I found Archie in his office, sitting behind his desk. He was making out a street test. When I stepped into the room, he looked up and smiled. "New probationary test, Daryl. Two little weasels run through the fire in the next couple of days."

"Listen, you son-of-a-bitch," I said through clenched teeth,

"if you ever put one of my men in a fire and cut his water again, you'll wish you were born dead. Understand?"

Archie smiled. "Don't you think you're jumping to conclusions?" he asked pleasantly.

"I heard it from two men. That's enough."

He leaned over and spat in his wastecan. "Sure, I cut the pump," he said calmly. "Then I turned it on again. He was out of water for two, maybe three seconds. No more."

"Why?"

"It's my job to evaluate these new guys, weed them out if they can't make the grade. We've all lost water at a fire once or twice. I wanted to see how Seiden would handle the situation."

I shook my head. "You're crazy, Archie. You don't do something like that to a man on his first major brush fire. Hell, Seiden got burned."

"So he'll remember to keep his head the next time." Archie spat again. "You'd rather have him panic on his second fire, or his third? Maybe get somebody else hurt, too? Come on, Daryl, grow up."

"I intend to make a written complaint to the chief, Archie," I told him.

He shrugged. "Do what you think you have to do. But don't count on having Seiden around

after the next shift. He didn't show me much today. He'd better do pretty damn good on his test or I guarantee he's down the road."

I left Archie's office without another word. When I took my letter of complaint to Chief Davidson, he read it silently, nodded, and said he'd take care of it.

"I think you'd better concentrate on watching Archie," he said. "He's been acting kind of crazy lately."

"You're telling me."

"When Seiden gets back from the hospital, have him take the rest of the day off. And when Archie gives him the probationary test next shift, I want you to be there at all times."

"Yes, sir."

"I'm not saying that I think Archie is behind those murders," he continued. "I've known and liked Archie McMasters a long time. But he's changed over the last year or so. Ever since we bought Old Number Seven, Archie's been acting real flaky. So keep a close eye on him, okay?"

"Yes, sir." I turned for the door, then paused and looked back. "Chief, no matter what happens, I want you to know that I've always liked Archie, too."

I went through the dispatch office and had just opened the

door into the truck bay when I heard the shouting. It was coming from outside.

Archie had Seiden pressed up against the wall of the station and was yelling, his face inches from Seiden's. "Snot-nosed little weasel!" he screamed. "You goddamn baby! Afraid of a little fire, are you!"

Todd Kelly was behind Archie, trying to pull him off. Seiden just stood there, a big white bandage on his cheek. His eyes were closed, his lips moving silently.

"Archie!" I called. He looked at me, then took a step back, hands clenched into fists.

"Mark, get in your car and go home right now. Chief's orders." He opened his eyes slowly, blinked once, then moved away like a sleepwalker. I looked over Archie's shoulder at Kelly. "Todd, go back to the kitchen."

He looked from Archie to me, then nodded and trotted into the station. I turned my attention to Archie.

"I think you better go home too, Archie," I said tonelessly. "Something's got you wound up, and you're making a fool of yourself."

He started to open his mouth and I shook my head. "If I have to go to the chief, I will," I said. "But I think it's better if you just take the rest of the day off. It's up to you."

Archie stared at me, his eyes narrow. His hands were still clenched, the knuckles white, and his body was trembling. Then he spat and pushed past me without a word. A moment later, I heard him start his car.

The rest of the shift passed without incident.

I had decided to spend my two days off shut up in the house, even though I don't like spending a lot of time at home any more. Although my wife took everything that was hers when she left, there are many memories in the house we'd shared for almost ten years.

I'd debated taking the phone off the hook as well, but finally decided against it. Chief Davidson takes a dim view of men who aren't available when off-duty personnel are needed to fight a fire.

I was just about to go to bed the night before I was due back to work. I turned off the bedside light and the phone rang. It was Tom Reynolds from the police department.

"We got a positive I.D. on the other three heads," he said.

"That was fast."

"Wait until you hear who they are. Or were."

I waited a moment, then said, "Come on, Tom, I'm tired and I have to be at the station at seven in the morning. If you've

got something to say, spit it out."

"Kevin O'Reilly, Charles Bergan, and Nick Clarke," Reynolds said. "Familiar?"

I almost dropped the phone. Like Casaloni, all three had been firemen who'd failed their probationary test and been fired. They were the only men who'd left the department in the last year. Since Old Number Seven had arrived.

My mind was racing. "How'd you identify them so quickly?"

"That list your chief gave us of men who'd been fired over the last two years," Reynolds said. "When we got to O'Reilly, Bergan, and Clarke, we had trouble locating them. Bergan and O'Reilly were roommates, had been since they both moved down from Boston a year and a half ago. They had some kind of falling out after O'Reilly got fired. Their former landlord couldn't provide us with any kind of forwarding address. Neither could the post office, which was kind of strange. Then we found that a missing person report had been filed by Clarke's mother six months ago. The file was still open." He laughed. "Three missing men, three unidentified heads. It sounded too good to be true, but it wasn't."

"Then there's no question on the identifications?"

"Perfect dental match-ups on

all three," he said. "We had a little trouble with Bergan, since the skull had been caved in and parts of the upper jaw were distorted. But it's them, all right."

"So what's this mean to me?" I asked.

"I just got off the phone with your chief," Reynolds said. "He tells me that each of those men was fired after failing the test Archie gave them."

"That's right."

"Okay," he said. "That should answer your question. Archie's our number one suspect as of right now. Maybe he wasn't content with getting them fired. Maybe he wanted more."

I thought of Archie's behavior with Seiden and shuddered. "You might be right," I said slowly.

"Watch him, Daryl. We're going to continue the investigation, and we may pull him in for questioning."

"Okay."

"Oh, one other thing," he said before he hung up.

"What?"

"Make sure you bring your gun with you tomorrow. You never know what he might try."

I wasn't looking forward to going in to work that morning. Whether Archie was guilty or not, it was going to be difficult dealing with him after the last shift. And I was

going to have to deal with him when Seiden took his probationary test.

As it turned out, one of my problems was already solved by the time I walked into the station. The night dispatcher told me that Seiden had called in sick.

I nodded and continued back to the bunkroom, carrying my police service revolver wrapped in a towel. The bunkroom was deserted as I opened my locker and slipped the gun inside.

I hardly saw Archie all day. The police department had asked us to remove the baffles in Old Number Seven's tank so they could make a more thorough search for evidence, and Chief Davidson said okay. While Captain Raymond, called back early from vacation; caught up on his paperwork, the men and I got into Old Number Seven's belly and cut out the baffles with a torch. It took us most of the morning, and when we were done, the detectives moved in.

Archie was coming out of the kitchen as I followed my shift inside. He was carrying his lunch on a tray.

"Morning, Archie," I said calmly.

He grinned, a wolf-like showing of stained teeth. "Sent another little weasel down the road yesterday, Daryl," he said. "Anderson from B Shift."

I felt the muscles of my face tighten. "Sorry to hear that. I thought Anderson would make it off probation."

He spat on the floor. "Yeah, I was kind of hoping I'd get a chance to do two in a row, but your boy called in sick." He laughed. "No matter. There's always next shift for him."

I shook my head slowly and went past him into the kitchen.

Late in the afternoon, the detectives finished up with Old Number Seven, and the chief sent us out to refill the tank without the baffles. If we'd done any structural damage to the tank when we cut out the baffles, it would leak.

The tank was filled without problem, and there were no visible leaks. The chief told us to leave it filled till morning, when we'd check again.

Wes came by the station about seven that night, just after we'd finished our supper. He brought banana splits for the whole duty crew. He'd been off the night before and was anxious for news about the murder investigation.

When we told him who the other victims were, I thought he was going to fall out of his chair. He'd been pretty friendly with Nick Clarke. "Sorry, Wes," I said. "I know how you feel, losing two friends in three days."

"Do the police have any

suspects, lieutenant?"

I looked at Todd Kelly. He was staring down at the table, playing with his spoon in the melting ice cream. "Yes," I said. "I think they'll catch the murderer before long."

Wes pushed his banana split away. "Boy, it sure takes your appetite away, doesn't it." He stood. "I didn't work last night, so I think I'll start a little early tonight. Anything special that needs to be done, lieutenant?"

"Not that I know of," I said. "You can check the work sheets in the barn."

"Stay away from Old Number Seven," Captain Raymond said. "It'll be out of service until tomorrow."

"Sure thing, captain." He left the kitchen.

"Poor Wes," Wilkes said, spooning up a dripping mouthful of ice cream. "His heart's in the right place, but I think he's missing bricks upstairs."

We all laughed.

Everybody was already in bed when I made a last swing through the station. I went into the dispatch office. "Did Wes bring you a banana split, too?" I asked Ricky, the night dispatcher.

Ricky nodded. "Yeah, you can always count on Wes." He laughed. "What a jerk. Coming in five hours early to make up for not having worked last

night." He shook his head. "Of course, Captain McMasters is just as bad."

"What do you mean?"

"He came in about half an hour ago and went back to his office," he said.

I felt a sudden chill. "Is he back there now?"

Ricky shook his head. "I saw him heading over to the other barn a couple of minutes ago."

"Call the police department," I said slowly. "Have them call Sergeant Reynolds at home. I want him to meet me in the main barn as soon as possible." I paused, then added, "And tell them to have him bring backup."

Ricky reached for the phone, frowning. I went back through the darkened building to the bunkroom.

The pistol was on the top shelf of my locker. I felt around until my fingers closed around the cool plastic of the grip. The other men on my shift slept as I pushed the gun into my belt.

"He'll be on his way, lieutenant," Ricky said as I walked through the dispatch office. I nodded and opened the front door.

The frogs in the ponds across the street from the station were croaking their mating songs as I crossed the narrow strip of grass separating the station from the main truck barn. The door on the side of the barn was

open, and light poured out into the darkness.

I stood silently at the door, listening. There was no sound coming from inside the barn. Licking my lips, I pulled the gun from my belt and let it hang loose at my side. I stepped through the open door.

Archie was on his hands and knees on top of Old Number Seven, peering down through the open hatch. I cleared my throat and said, "That's it, Archie."

He looked up, frowning. "What the hell do you think you're doing, Daryl?"

I shook my head. "Put your hands on your head, Archie. The cops will be here in a few minutes. They'll have some questions for you, and they're going to want answers."

"I think you better put that thing down and get up here," Archie hissed, still on hands and knees.

I raised the pistol. "I'm not kidding. Just do what I told you."

He looked from the gun to my face. "You're making a mistake," he said. "A big mistake." "Maybe."

He straightened and put his hands on his head. Then he spat through the open hatch into Old Number Seven's tank. "How long have I been out here, Daryl?" he asked calmly.

"Ricky said a couple of minutes."

He nodded. "Right. Now you want to tell me how I managed to pop the bolts on this hatch and put Bobby Anderson's head in the tank during those couple of minutes?"

I almost dropped the gun. "Bobby Anderson's head?" I asked in a near whisper.

He sighed deeply and reached down into the tank. His hand came up clutching a dripping handful of hair. I watched in horror as he lifted the grisly object. There was no question. It was the head of Bobby Anderson, who'd failed his probationary test a day earlier and been fired.

Archie opened his fingers and the head fell into the tank with a splash. He smiled. "Right church, buddy. Wrong pew."

"Where's Wes?" I demanded. Then I felt something sharp press into the back of my neck and I had my answer.

"Drop the gun, lieutenant," Wes said softly. "I don't want to have to cut you."

I let the revolver fall to the floor. "You heard what I said, Wes?"

"Step forward, lieutenant," he ordered. I did as he told me and felt the pressure on the back of my neck ease for a moment.

I whipped around, swinging.

Wes stood a yard back, the muzzle of my gun leveled at my stomach. "Back up," he said.

I stumbled backward as he answered my question. "You mean about the cops? Yeah, lieutenant, I heard. I don't plan on sticking around that long." He gestured with the pistol. "Up against Old Number Seven. Captain McMasters, get down next to him."

I leaned back against the truck. "Why'd you kill them, Wes? Five young men."

Archie began to clamber down awkwardly above me. "Now wait a minute," Wes said. "I only killed four of them. I didn't have anything to do with O'Reilly."

"Come on, Wes," I said. "Don't give me that."

Archie dropped to the floor beside me. He was breathing heavily.

Wes's eyes were wild behind the thick glasses. His mouth was stretched in an obscene parody of a smile.

"It's true," he said. "I came in here one night to pick up my tool kit and I found that little weasel Bergan." Wes paused. "You know, he must have hated Captain McMasters. Hated him for getting him fired. And he knew how much the captain loved Old Number Seven." He pointed at the truck. "He killed O'Reilly.

I stood right here and saw him put O'Reilly's head in Old Number Seven's tank. He probably thought it was a good joke on the captain. Well, the joke was on him."

"You killed him," I said.

"Damn right. Bashed his head in with a nozzle. Then I tried to fish O'Reilly's head out of the tank, but I couldn't. So there I was, stuck with Bergan's body. I tell you, lieutenant, I didn't know what to do. Then I remembered that pile of stuff they were burning the next day out on 511. I decided to hide Bergan's body in there and let them burn it, too."

"Why'd you put his head in the tank?" Archie asked through gritted teeth.

Wes smiled. "They had been roommates, captain," he said reasonably. "I thought they should be together."

I felt Archie stiffen next to me and I put my arm across his chest. "And the others?"

"They had to die," Wes said.

"Why?"

"I told you the other day, lieutenant," he said in a patient tone. "If I had the chance to be a firefighter, I would have passed my test. I mean, it just wasn't fair. Here I really wanted to be a fireman and I couldn't. And there they were, healthy, fit to be firefighters, and what do they do? Goof off, not work

hard enough to pass Captain McMasters' test." He shook his head. "They let the captain down. He acts like he hates probationary firemen, but I know that's not true. He just wants them to buckle down, work hard, and be good firefighters. But they didn't. They let him down. I warned them, lieutenant. I told them that they'd better pass their test or they'd be down the road. But they wouldn't listen."

"You need help, Wes," I said slowly. "Put the gun down and I'll see that you get it."

"It's too late for that," he said. "Nobody would have thought to look in Old Number Seven's tank again. I could have gotten away with Bobby. But Captain McMasters had to come in and ruin everything." He pointed the pistol at Archie. "Why'd you do that, captain? I did it because of the way they treated you."

"We would have found the head tomorrow, Wes," I said quickly. "We still have to drain the tank and get inside."

He took a step back. "You're lying to me," he said. "You're trying to keep me here so the cops will get me."

He backed up to the open door and glanced quickly over his shoulder. Then he reached back and closed the door. "They're here," he said.

"Give me the gun, Wes," I pleaded.

He looked up at Old Number Seven and smiled. "They won't be able to stop a fire engine," he said, starting for the truck's cab.

Wes climbed up onto the seat, keeping the muzzle of the revolver aimed in our direction. Suddenly Archie pushed himself away from the side of the truck.

"You stay out of that truck, you little weasel," Archie said, advancing on Wes. "You're not fit to drive Old Number Seven."

I started after him. Wes pointed the gun at Archie's chest. "Stop right there, captain," he said, his voice shaking. "I don't want to hurt you."

"You don't scare me, you little weasel." Archie was only a couple of feet from Wes, and I was right behind him. "Now give me that gun and get down."

Archie put one foot up on the cab and Wes fired. The force of the bullet drove Archie back on top of me and we both went down. As I lay there, trying to push Archie off of me, I heard Wes start Old Number Seven. He threw it into gear and roared out of the barn.

From the floor, I saw and heard it all. There were shouts, and I briefly caught the image of Tom Reynolds waving his arms in the glow of Old Number

Seven's headlights. Then Wes reached the road and made a tight turn to the right.

Without baffles in the truck, the full tank of water was very unstable. The unchecked motion of the water in the tank flipped Old Number Seven as Wes made the turn, and she went over on her side. I heard Wes scream, once.

I finally got Archie off me and laid him flat on the concrete floor. He was still conscious, but blood was pouring from a wound in his chest. "Hang on, Archie, I'll get an ambulance," I said quickly.

He shook his head. "No time," he said. He coughed and tried unsuccessfully to spit. The red-tinged mucus dripped down his cheek.

"Little four-eyed weasel," he muttered. "Shows what happens when you try to be nice to people."

Archie coughed again and was silent. I sat, waiting for him to continue. Then Tom Reynolds said, "I think he's dead, Daryl."

I looked up at the detective

standing in the open doorway. Then I looked down at Archie again. "Yeah, I guess you're right. And Wes?"

He pointed. I pushed myself to my feet and walked down the drive to where Old Number Seven lay on its side. Water was pouring out of the open hatch, spreading across the asphalt.

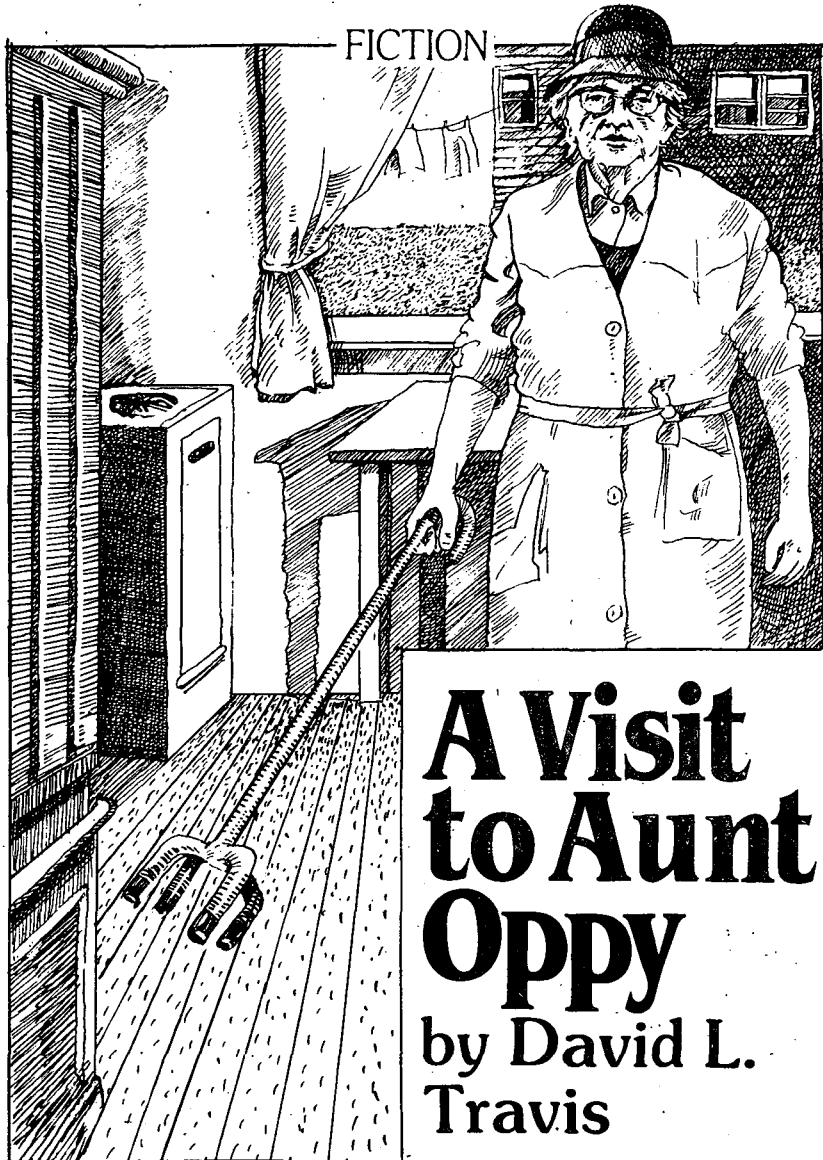
When the truck flipped, Wes had been thrown out the open window. The truck had landed on his back as he sprawled face down on the ground. He'd been pinned.

I stared down at him. His face was covered by a puddle of water from the leaking tank. From the look of the ground around his outstretched hands, Wes had drowned.

We never tried to get Old Number Seven back on the road. There wasn't a man in the department who'd have ridden her if we had. So Chief Davidson sold her for scrap, twenty years after she'd rolled off the line, bright and shiny. And Wes Collins became the last man to go down the road in Old Number Seven.

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FICTION



A Visit to Aunt Oppy

by David L.
Travis

Rock's Hill, Texas, has always struck me as long on rock and short on hill. However, I guess those things are relative, and on the plains of north Texas an extra three hundred feet of altitude makes a hill.

It is a small town, some farming and ranching. A cattle feedlot

Illustration by Jim Ceribello

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and small packing plant are north of town, which is fine, except when the wind blows from the north. I've met practically everyone in town, thanks to Aunt Oppy. In fact I've met most of them several times, since Aunt Oppy doesn't remember or doesn't care that she has introduced me before.

The problem from my point of view is that she introduces me as "my nephew Freddy, the policeman." Or, if the person is one she wants to impress, I become "—Freddy, the chief of police."

Actually, I am neither. But the trouble with Aunt Oppy's facts is that even when they are not correct they aren't quite incorrect.

On most of my visits to Aunt Oppy, the policeman bit has been only mildly embarrassing. On this year's annual duty and pleasure stay, she almost got me—both of us—killed.

Aunt Oppy is, in a way, a little like the famous remark about the Holy Roman Empire ("neither holy, nor Roman, nor an empire"). Sorry; I taught history for some years. What I mean is that she isn't really my aunt, but some kind of cousin. And of course her name isn't Oppy, it is Ophelia Ethel Blockton.

Don't call her Ophelia; I did once, and I'll swear the temperature dropped ten degrees. She made up her mind at about age six that her name was Oppy, and it has been ever since. I guess I can't blame her.

My name is Frederick Kenneth Werthin. Freddy to Aunt Oppy and the good folks of Rock's Hill. And almost the late Freddy Werthin to all concerned, in very embarrassing circumstances.

It happened not long after I stopped by for my usual week's visit. I live in New Jersey now, since my second retirement, and I take four weeks' vacation, circling the country doing family duty visits and some fishing. Aunt Oppy is always on my list. And will be next year despite her getting me shot at this year while I was wearing absolutely nothing.

"Policeman" and "chief of police" are the keys to the whole thing, along with some wind, a clothesline, and Aunt Oppy's imagination.

I went into the army at age eighteen and did twenty years. Made it to lieutenant. And ten of those years were with the MP's. A policeman? Yes, but not exactly. After my twenty, I got out, took some college, and taught school for fifteen years at a small town in south Jersey. When enrollments dropped, I was offered an early retirement incentive and took it. That was retirement number two and a second pension check.

I settled in the small borough I had taught in and entered local politics. I am now a town councilman (salary: two thousand dollars a year) and I get an extra five hundred to be Director of Public Safety. That really means that I help get the police and fire budgets passed. Does it make me chief of police? Of course not, but—in a way. Aunt Oppy's way.

It is a long trip from New Jersey to Texas, and I usually sleep most of my first day in Rock's Hill. On the second day I took Aunt Oppy to the doctor for a regular checkup of the hip joint replacement she had had done about eight months before. She has made a remarkable recovery for age eighty-one. She calls it her new universal joint and has only a slight limp.

She does walk with a cane now, one of those fancy ones with four prongs and a rubber grip. Aunt Oppy claims she doesn't need it, really, but that she gets a lot better service and more attention when she carries it.

Aunt Oppy's house is in an old neighborhood, running a little to seed. The house next door is a rental unit and has a high turnover. I nearly always get introduced to new tenants there.

This year's pair were on their way out just as we were, and Aunt Oppy called to them. They came over—Aunt Oppy has a penetrating voice and can be compelling. The young man was in his mid to late twenties, very pale, with a sparse growth of black beard. The woman, about the same age, wore tight jeans, a tight western shirt, and a tight copper wig.

"Mr. Hansen, Mrs. Hansen, I want you to meet my nephew Freddy, who will be visiting me for a while."

The man's face was blank, and he seemed tired, but he shook hands readily. In Texas it is an insult not to.

Aunt Oppy slid her gaze to the woman, who was staring pointedly at her watch. "You both want to be careful. Freddy is chief of police where he comes from." She ignored my look.

The woman had dismissed me right away with a casual glance—my visual impact on young women is not great—but her eyes widened a bit at the word "police." She turned abruptly and walked across the yard to their driveway. Hansen seemed flustered by his wife's behavior, but he nodded to us and hurried after her.

Considering her age, location, and nature, Aunt Oppy isn't *really* nosy. Just observant and interested. And, as I've mentioned, if her conclusions aren't always right, they aren't wrong, either. In the

car she told me that Hansen was a night watchman at the feedlot and did occasional shift work at the packing plant.

I wrinkled my nose. "Must go through a lot of laundry."

Aunt Oppy didn't answer. The lots and plant smell like money to Texans.

"And what does Mrs. Hansen do?"

"Nothing." Aunt Oppy looked grim. "Or you *could* say, quite a lot."

I looked at her and put a leer in my voice. "Oh, really. Perhaps I should have been more gracious."

"You? She likes them young and slender."

Aunt Oppy certainly knows how to build my ego. It helped some when she added, "And stupid."

The next day we went shopping. I eat well at Aunt Oppy's, but she does tend to run to casseroles, stews, and meatloaf under various fancy aliases. And beef done to a depressing grey. So I take charge of steak when I visit, starting with the purchase. They still have an old fashioned meat market in the grocery store. Aunt Oppy hooks her cane on a cart and gets everything else while I negotiate with the butcher.

This butcher was a woman, which I found hard to believe in Rock's Hill, but the twentieth century is creeping in. We had some conversation while we agreed that steaks could easily be too thick. Nice woman.

When I looked around, I found Aunt Oppy carefully studying the bread rack. She already had bread in the cart. She wouldn't think of interfering with a bachelor talking to a female. Not even if the bachelor is me—confirmed, fat, and past middle age. I found it flattering.

I put my package of steaks in the cart and masterfully insisted on paying. For a true wonder she let me.

We had to wait as a flat-faced young clerk with more greasy hair than necessary finished ogling a rather flashy blonde as he slowly rang up her order. She participated in the ogling (yes, that can be done) and whispered to him as she left.

The clerk, with a sly smile, watched the blonde all the way out the door before reluctantly beginning our order. And damned if he didn't try to shortchange me. I gave him two twenties on a bill of twenty-seven something, and he handed me two dollars and change. I haven't lived all over the world for nothing, and I fairly

politely told him I wanted my other ten dollars. He started to deny any error, but Aunt Oppy's voice overrode him. He may not have realized she was with me.

"Willie Jordan, you give my nephew his ten dollars. You should know better than to try your tricks on him. He is a policeman."

Apparently she knew him and he her, because he handed over my ten with a mumble that could have been an apology. From the look he gave us it was clear that Aunt Oppy wasn't a favorite and that I wasn't going to land on his list, either.

As I put the sacks in the car—I can lift twenty-seven dollars' worth of groceries all too easily these days—Aunt Oppy used her all-purpose epithet.

"Trash." I assumed trustingly that she didn't mean me, but Willie Jordan. "And that woman, too."

"The blonde? I wonder if he tried to shortchange her, too."

"Not of *money*," snapped Aunt Oppy. When I turned in mild surprise she almost blushed. "That was my neighbor, Mrs. Hansen," with distaste. "You met her yesterday. Don't you remember?"

"Oh. I didn't recognize her."

Aunt Oppy sniffed. "She has a dozen of those cheap wigs in several colors."

"You told Jordan I was a policeman," I said in a neutral voice. "And you told *her* I was police chief."

She ignored me.

"Didn't you say Hansen was a night watchman?"

"Yes, at the feedlot. He watches out for the cattle, and she watches out for him. When he catches her, there will be hell to pay."

I was a little shocked. Aunt Oppy doesn't like bad language. "Don't you mean *if* he catches her?"

"No, I mean when. She isn't smart enough to be that—active—and not get caught eventually. Trash. Born to be murdered."

Aunt Oppy reads a lot of mystery books.

The steaks were good, even though Texans don't believe in aged beef. And the tossed salad with homemade dressing was excellent.

Aunt Oppy goes to bed early, and I sit up late and read. When I did retire, I had to wedge a sock in the door to hold it closed. The settling of the old house has misaligned the latch. I opened a window. Early fall in Rock's Hill is nice. Sunny and warm during the day, and fifty to sixty degree sleeping temperatures at night. The

Hansens' porch light was bright—I guessed it would be on till his late shift was over—but it didn't bother me for long. Sleeping is one of my major hobbies and I'm good at it.

The next day was typical of my visits. I got up around ten and pattered around the house doing little chores; cleaned out a gutter, tacked up a loose shingle. Little things that Aunt Oppy could do as well as I—or better. But the doctor who installed the new hip had said definitely no ladders, and Aunt Oppy minded him. At least while I was there.

As I carried some trash to the alley, Mrs. Hansen was hanging out some laundry. No wig, just thin brown curls.

I smiled at her and tried a small joke. "Using the solar-powered clothes dryer, eh?"

She glared at me blankly. The look made it clear that idle chatter with a fat, old "chief of police" was not in her plans; so I just said "Have a nice day," and went on. She continued to watch me all the way.

Lunch was Texas style chicken and dumplings, which I love (and which would be a real revelation to Easterners). I ate too much, and took a nap afterward. Aunt Oppy doesn't take naps. She may doze in her chair—but she won't take naps. She says naps have made me old before my time, and I ask her what keeps her young beyond her time. We get along well.

For supper I took her out to the truck stop for chicken fried steak. I won't try to explain that dish except to say it is an acquired taste and they don't do them in New Jersey.

Afterwards, some TV, reading, pretty much the same mixture as before. About five thirty A.M. I woke up, vaguely aware that the porch light next door was out but the kitchen light was on. I still don't know if voices woke me up, but if so, they didn't keep me awake.

The wind blows in Texas. It blows a lot. Winds that would have roofs flying off in New Jersey are regarded as ordinary breezes. There was an ordinary breeze that night.

The next morning I cleaned up some trash in the back yard. Aunt Oppy has trouble bending over with the new hip. Me, I bend easily, but sometimes have a problem with straightening up.

I was surprised to see the Hansens' clothesline still had clothes on it. Some were on the ground against the fence, and several items were in Aunt Oppy's back yard.

I picked them up and went in to report. Aunt Oppy was properly aghast at such a slovenly practice as leaving laundry out all night to get dirty again. She took the things I had gathered, picked up her cane, and marched next door. She was back immediately looking both annoyed and thoughtful.

"Mr. Hansen answered the door. He practically grabbed the clothes from me and shut the door in my face before I could say three words."

"That must have been a shock to your system."

She frowned at such irreverence. "He looked wild."

I checked the back window. Hansen was snatching clothes off the line, pins flying. He practically ran down the line and back in the house. I heard the door slam. Aunt Oppy was right; he did look rough.

Aunt Oppy was still thoughtful. "I wonder if he came home early last night? Too early?"

That evening the porch light was off, though the inside lights burned all night. Hansen didn't go to work—or at least he didn't take the car.

The next day there was no sign of life from the house, though the lights stayed on and the car was still there. Aunt Oppy kept careful track.

"What if he caught her with someone and killed them?" she suddenly asked me shortly after lunch.

I could only stare at her.

She went on defensively. "That would explain why those clothes weren't taken in when the wind got up, and why he was so wild about getting them in."

I made a mistake then. I was patronizing as I patted her on the shoulder. "Too many mystery stories, Aunt Oppy."

I left to have my car serviced, and to get a new headlight. I should have remembered Aunt Oppy did not like to be patronized. And that she was often right even if she was wrong.

Though I didn't find it out until too late, I had irritated her into taking action. When I returned, the Hansens weren't mentioned, but Aunt Oppy exuded an air of accomplishment and expectation. We had a quiet supper, however, and she went to bed early. I read late as usual.

Aunt Oppy wasn't heavy enough to make the hall floor creak, she couldn't make two sets of footsteps, and she certainly couldn't

whisper in two voices. Even in my customary awakening fog, I was aware that something was wrong.

Half-awake, I swung my feet over the edge of the bed and tried to focus my eyes on the door. It silently and slowly opened and something came into view. The kitchen light from the house next door was still on; now it glinted off metal held in what seemed to be a hand.

When my addled brain realized that the hand held a gun and that the gun was swinging toward the bed, something other than my mind took over and I lunged against the door. Since I weigh close to three hundred pounds, this action had several effects. The door closed on the wrist, a man yelled in pain, and the gun went off. It bounced free, and clattered off somewhere into the darkness.

That reflex lunge of mine probably saved my life, though I was much too busy then to consider it.

A body fell against the door as I was drawing back, and the door swung against my bare toes. It was my turn to yell, and I used language Aunt Oppy didn't like as I danced back. A thin body fell into the room on its knees and scrabbled around one-handedly for something.

Again my subconscious took action before my brain realized he was feeling for the gun: I jumped on him. This was effective, since I outweighed him by more than a hundred pounds and, even though he was young and active, he was hampered by a broken wrist. And by my utter determination that he was not going to get that gun. I hit him a couple of times—nearly breaking my hand—and then we lay there almost companionably, him groaning, and me panting. I was vaguely wondering what was going on, but most of all I wondered what to do next.

The light in my bedroom came on, and a woman's voice told me what to do next.

"Get off him, you fat slob."

I looked up, squinting, at a short woman in jeans and at another damn gun pointed at me. My first thought was to wish that I slept in pajamas. Or something. In the nude I am definitely not a candidate for one of those "hunk" calendars. My second thought was that she couldn't miss a target my size at that range. And my third thought was that I didn't think I *could* get up.

I stared at the woman—even noticing that she was young, vaguely familiar, almost pretty despite a cheap yellow wig—and

wondered if I was going to die without ever knowing what the hell was going on.

She stepped back into the dark hallway and extended her arm. Even as she spoke, a part of my mind couldn't believe what it was hearing.

"Okay, you asked for it—"

Details were clear; I could even see the tendons in the red-nailed hand tightening, when something silvery flashed out from behind her and cracked on her forearm. She shrieked, the gun went off—the bullet landed too close to but not in me—and the gun fell on the bedroom floor. That made two guns where one was more than too many.

The silvery thing, which I realized was Aunt Oppy's cane, came back into view, and all four prongs jabbed at the now gunless woman with all of Aunt Oppy's ninety pounds behind them.

Aunt Oppy wasn't talking, just giving little falsetto growls as she drove the woman down the hall out of my view.

By then I had my breath back, my eyes open, and some of what I am usually pleased to call my wits about me. I found the first gun—it was practically under my right arm—and grabbed it. The man I was sitting on was showing signs of movement, so I clouted him another one. He lay back. As I found the other gun I yelled to ask Aunt Oppy if she was all right.

Her voice was, as always, penetrating. "I'm fine—how are you?"

Then I did something I had been wanting to do for some time. I grabbed my robe and hurried into the living room, turning on lights as I went. I had a gun in each hand and the robe over my arm as I entered.

Aunt Oppy, dressed in a thoroughly decorous and neatly belted robe, stood over a cowed young woman who lay on the floor, blonde wig askew, with wide eyes staring at the prongs of the cane that menaced them. Aunt Oppy had a grimly determined look on her face. She snapped a quick look at me before she turned back to her captive.

"Merciful heavens, Freddy, put something on, you're naked."

She obviously had things under control, and I was in full agreement about getting something on. I set the guns on a bookshelf and hurriedly slipped into the robe. I put the smaller gun into the pocket and went back to my bedroom holding the other. The man was making a feeble attempt to get out the window, but he couldn't handle it one-handed. I grabbed him by the gaudy belt he was

wearing and manhandled him down the hall. He was almost as tall as I, but very skinny. I'm afraid I wasn't very gentle with him. I don't like being awakened, I don't like being naked in front of strangers, and most of all I don't like guns and bullets pointed in my direction.

I threw the whimpering young man—I could see now he was barely out of his teens, if that—down beside the whimpering woman, who seemed a little older. I was perfectly willing for them to whine in two-part harmony. I had a feeling I should know both of them.

I took the cane from Aunt Oppy and covered the pair with the gun. The woman seemed more afraid of the cane than the gun.

"All right, I'll hold these two. You get to the phone and get some police out here."

She limped carefully to the kitchen phone, had a short conversation, and returned.

"They said they would be right here. I'd better unlock the door—oh." She broke off as she saw the door standing half open. It seemed to shock her more than the fight had. "Anyone could walk in."

I nodded. "And anyone did. Do you have any idea what this is about?"

She avoided answering me, so I knew she did. "I'll just turn on the porch light for the police."

I put on my best interrogative voice. "Aunt Oppy, do you know who these two are?"

To my surprise, it worked. "Of course I do. That's the Hansen woman from next door."

Damned if it wasn't. Those wigs really fool you. "You mean the one that was murdered last night?"

"Yes, well, obviously I was mistaken." She hurried on. "And he is that trashy grocery clerk, Willie Jordan. You remember."

And then I did. He looked different from the slyly blank-faced young man who had tried to shortchange me, but he'd been through a lot lately.

"But why," I asked, "did they break in here with guns?"

Aunt Oppy had recovered, however, and had gone to the kitchen. Her voice came back to me. "I'm going to put on some coffee. We'll be wanting some before long."

She stayed in the kitchen, though I heard her pattering. I looked at my watch and found it was a little after four A.M. And in a few

minutes I heard a siren in the distance.

Shortly, there were police everywhere. They all knew Aunt Oppy and she introduced me to them, though for once she left off the policeman business.

I gladly surrendered the guns and custody of the two sullen intruders, and they were hauled away to the jail, where a doctor was called to set a smashed wrist and a broken arm—Aunt Oppy had gotten good leverage in her swing.

My statement was efficiently taken, and Aunt Oppy efficiently gave hers. She gave me a triumphant glance as she told them, "I told Freddy there was something wrong over there!" I was having a reaction—it's called delayed total fear—and didn't respond.

The policeman in charge was grim. "Well, there certainly was," he said. "We found a dead man in the house. He had been shot in the head twice, probably with this little gun. Apparently he was passed out in a drunken stupor when shot."

Aunt Oppy gasped. "That must be Mr. Hansen. He caught those two and kicked her out. She came back tonight and shot him."

The policeman seemed to accept this as likely enough, but he was still puzzled. "But why did they break in here?"

Aunt Oppy didn't look at him or at me. She spoke off-handedly. "Oh, I expect they thought an old woman alone would be easy to rob for getaway money." She smiled at him. "Wasn't it fortunate my nephew was here to spoil their plans."

The policeman accepted this as well. I stored it away. The police left soon after that, though they had some coffee first. So did I. It was after seven o'clock by then and I planned to go back to bed as soon as my pulse rate got out of three figures.

I fixed a makeshift lock on the front door and watched Aunt Oppy straighten up the front room.

"Aunt Oppy." My voice was level.

So was hers, but she didn't look at me. "Yes, Freddy."

"I'm going to let your story to the police go. But you and I are going to discuss what actually happened."

"Yes, Freddy," she said with suspicious meekness.

"Why did those two come in here and try to shoot me? Me, mind you, not you." She was about to go innocent on me. "Aunt Oppy, I want to know what you did."

"Oh, well, I'm not sure. Maybe it was that note I slipped under their front door while you were out yesterday."

I folded my arms. "And just what did it say?"

"Oh, I said that you had been watching and taking notes as a policeman, and unless you saw both Mr. and Mrs. Hansen this morning, you were going to the police with the information."

I waited.

"I was sure he had done something to her."

"And instead she had done something to him. And your note brought her and her lover over here to do something to me. Without that, they would probably have just taken off."

She put on a shocked look. "Well, I didn't want him, that is her, to get away. Besides, I had full confidence in my policeman nephew."

"Aunt Oppy, I am not a—oh, let it go. What are you going to do when the police find that note and ask about it?"

She was smug. "They won't find it. I took it out of that woman's pocket and burned it while I was making coffee."

"And when Mrs. Hansen talks about it?"

"Her word? Against mine? Besides, I think her lawyer won't be anxious for her to admit she came here to commit murder."

She sounded very confident and, I had to agree, with some justification. I stretched as Aunt Oppy carried cups to the kitchen. But something still bothered me.

"Aunt Oppy, you are a light sleeper. You must have heard those two long before I did. What kept you?" I still pictured that hand tightening on that gun.

She looked flustered for the first time. "Well, I had to get my robe on; I couldn't come out without proper clothes."

"I did."

She ignored that. "Besides—"

"Besides?"

"Well, I heard a woman's voice. I thought perhaps you were entertaining a guest."

I stared at her, open-mouthed. "A guest? But who—"

"You were awfully friendly with that woman at the meat market."

I could only shake my head. "Aunt Oppy, you really flatter me." I looked at her from the corner of my eye. "But, you know—"

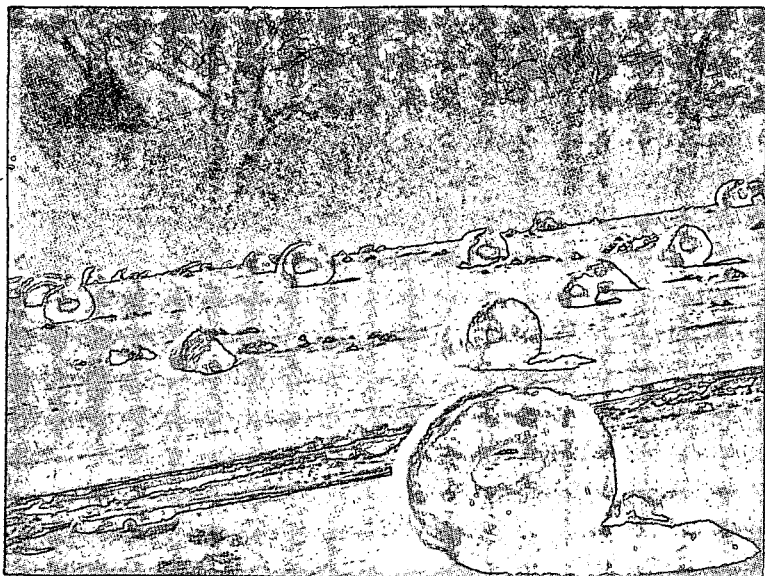
"What?"

"That's not a bad idea."

She started to lift her cane. "Freddy Werthin, you—"

And then we both started to laugh.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Clyde H. Smith

Rolling right along . . . We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017.

The winning entry for the September Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.

FICTION

The Waltz of the Jewel Snatcher

by Chris Coover



Illustration by Kurt Wallace

From the shadowed portico Zoltan Erdos, chief detective of the Vienna Prefecture of Police, watched as darkened coaches, their amber lamps gleaming, rolled through the rain-soaked Prinzenstrasse and up to the broad staircase of the palace of the Baron von Opitz. Horses stamped and blew steam from their flared nostrils, coachmen called to each other. Dark furs and bright silk gowns sparkled in the light of gas lanterns. Be-whiskered gentlemen in full-length formal coats offered their elbows to their bejeweled wives and excited daughters, and climbed the marble stairs flanked by a row of officers from the baron's own cavalry regiment, campaign ribbons and gold braid decorating their chests. The soldiers stood stiffly, not daring to let their eyes linger too long on the finely formed ankles of the loveliest women of Viennese society as they flounced from their carriages and headed in the direction of the grand salon where the ball was about to commence.

No, surely no one of any standing in society would miss the baron's annual ball, no matter how hard the rain. Zoltan made a face at the drizzle and reached down to readjust, for what must have been the fifth time that evening, his satin cummerbund, which pinched abominably. Curse his careless Bulgarian tailor and his slapdash measurements. Of course he had to admit, in all fairness, that his ample paunch, rising like the Zugspitze from his large frame, would have made any tailor's task a hard one. Momentarily he regretted the large wedge of Sachertorte he'd had at lunch. He sighed and moved out of the shadows.

Ahead of him in the lobby he recognized the Margravin of Berolstein in a billowing Chinese brocade gown, laughing loudly in response to a whispered comment of her escort, a strapping colonel of the Horse Guards thirty years her junior. Shameless old reprobate, Zoltan clucked to himself. At her age! To one side he noticed a squat, dark man whose wide smile, directed at a young woman in blue, showed only a single gleaming gold tooth. Ah, Mr. Shoe-leather himself, Zoltan thought. If one can sell enough saddles, handbags, and shoes, even ugliness and coarseness are not insurmountable social handicaps.

"But I insist, my dear," the fat man croaked. "I will give you a private fitting, whenever you wish. Special attention must be paid to feet as delicate as I'm sure yours are."

"You are so obliging, Herr Froschmann, so very obliging. May I call at midday, on Tuesday?"

Zoltan moved on, threading a path through the opulently dressed throng crowding the loggia, listening to the cheerful laughter, excited greetings, and rustle of silk petticoats, sniffing appreciatively the aroma of polished leather and expensive perfumes, his eyes catching the dazzling flash of jewelry in the glare of the huge chandeliers. The jewels, of course, were the reason for Zoltan's presence at this select affair.

He tried not to stare too noticeably at the very visible shoulders and cleavage of an auburn-haired daughter of one of the emperor's ministers as she bent back to adjust the bow at her waist. No daughter of mine would ever be allowed to reveal herself before a roomful of men like that, he thought, ignoring the fact that he had neither daughter nor wife.

The girl straightened up, caught his eye with a mocking glance, and turned to greet a tall officer who hurried in her direction.

Shaking his head, he strolled toward the ballroom, reflecting on the problem of the jewels. As was often the case with valuable jewelry, lately it had been disappearing: diamonds the size of peach-stones, gone from the wrinkled throats of dowagers; emeralds, greener than the Stadtpark in springtime, missing from the well-manicured fingers of young society wives; rubies, red as the sunset over Schonbrunn Palace, somehow taken from the cuffs of virile noblemen. Not to mention the amethyst tiaras, gold stickpins, opal pendants, and assorted carnelians, corals, aquamarines, pearls, jaspers, and agates. The list of jewels stolen was as daunting as the list of owners from whom they had been taken. Zoltan winced. The total value of these thefts over the past sixteen months was, even to him, an experienced detective, sobering. And even more extraordinary, all these robberies had been accomplished at the most exclusive gatherings of Viennese society: christenings at St. Stephen's Cathedral in full view of the archbishop himself, debutante parties attended by even the Crown Prince, the annual Cavalry Ball, and a host of other balls, lawn parties, teas, funerals, and art exhibitions.

"But I tell you, Gerhard, it will be a great success! We are certain to make millions on this scheme once the council has given its approval, and you know my influence with them. Don't miss your chance to buy into the proposition."

"That's the count's nephew, who is to inherit all those estates? He looks about as intelligent as one of his uncle's foxhounds, if you ask me, and not half as attractive." Loud laughter.

At the fringes of the enormous ballroom, Zoltan caught sight of a familiar figure. Oh-ho, my old friend the so-called Duke of Sardinia. If you are here, it must mean that the gambling has gone well for you of late. You may dupe these giddy young girls into thinking you're a duke, but I know that you're the second son of a Venetian blacksmith, and that you cheat, quite skillfully, at baccarat. Someday you'll get careless, and then you and I will have a reckoning.

Certainly no ordinary thief was responsible for this rash of disappearances, for the wealthy of Vienna took all the usual precautions against the depredations of the criminal classes: guest lists were rigorously compiled and screened, footmen and house staffs were trained to inspect all invitations carefully, and often were able to recognize at sight any unexpected visitor. Moreover, all entrances at these affairs were guarded by Zoltan's sharp-eyed junior officers, while others, in appropriate dress, mingled with the crowds, watching for the quick hand of the cutpurse, the calculated stumble of the pickpocket, the cleverly staged diversion, the bold grab for a watch or necklace. Still, despite these irksome and elaborate protective measures, the jewels continued to disappear.

No, one of the elect, a man of special talents, was likely to be at work here. Zoltan recalled, not without a certain fondness, the most skilled thieves he had encountered, while he watched the richly dressed couples assembling in the ballroom amid the hum of conversation. There was Werner Weigl—certainly a great pickpocket in his day—who for years had haunted Vienna's sporting circuit: the races and the ring where tipsy aristocrats, with vast sums riding on each heat of the race or each punch of the round, paid little attention to their bulging pockets and handbags. Werner, though, had served six years in the Fesselator prison, and upon his release had retired to a small farm owned by a sister. He sang in a church choir and raised geese, seemingly a reformed man. Weigl was decidedly out. So, too, was the Russian master-thief Zaslavski, "the Cossack" to his underworld acquaintances. Zaslavski hardly ever spoke and made a specialty of robbing the crowds who nightly thronged the theaters and the opera houses of Vienna. For years he had lived comfortably off the trinkets and purses purloined in the semi-darkness, while all eyes were on the stage. As silent as a paving stone he was, Zoltan remembered. But even the Cossack was now locked up, betrayed to the police by his landlady, whom he'd seduced and quarreled with. Then there was Karl Kreisbach,

the swarthy one, stabbed in a scuffle in a beer cellar. He had to be dropped from the list, and Stachel also, with his clubfoot and incredibly dextrous hands, arrested at Baden-Baden this past summer with over a hundred thousand florins' worth of stolen jewelry in his packed suitcase. All the best, all the most dangerous thieves, were now out of commission, it seemed.

The orchestra was tuning up under the direction of Maestro Johann Strauss himself, resplendent in a scarlet uniform trimmed with turquoise ribbon and gold braid. He tapped his white conductor's baton on the podium, raised it high above his head, and with a strong stroke launched the orchestra into the energetic strains of the "Wine, Women, and Song Waltz," a tune that all Vienna, of late, had been humming or whistling. The massed violin bows rose and fell in unison. Gentlemen with silk cravats at their throats respectfully approached prospective partners, bowing low. Muscular gloved hands were offered and delicately touched by more slender gloved hands, and the dancing began, lighted by flickering rows of chandeliers thirty feet above the heads of the guests.

Zoltan had examined most carefully all the records of the recent jewel thefts, had interviewed at length each and every victim: tearful duchesses, blasé young men-about-town, impatient young heiresses, outraged and abusive military officers. The inestimable fortunes of many of them were hardly troubled by the loss of a two-hundred-carat sapphire, or a gold cigarette case set with a small fortune in diamonds. No, Zoltan thought philosophically, it was not the loss itself, but the offense, the insult, the affront, that made the duchesses tearful or the officers abusive. And for all his painstaking work, his meticulous hours of interviews, he still had not an inkling of who might be responsible for this exasperating string of robberies. His cummerbund was pinching again, in the same place.

An extremely proper looking elderly couple danced by. The man, bespectacled and balding, visibly counted the steps of the waltz as his wife, plump and scowling, dutifully followed his mincing, uncertain movements. Ah, Counselor Bergdorf, what if that heiress wife of yours knew, as I do, about your midday visits to the apartment of the confectioner's buxom widow in the Nelkestrasse? After all, it was a detective's business to go out of his way to learn all about the potential targets of thieves, just as he took pains to learn all he could about the thieves themselves. Yes, Zoltan knew them both: the lambs and the wolves.

The first dance ended; a hundred couples bowed to each other and exchanged glances: some longing, some hopeful, others lustful or merely indifferent. At the end of the ballroom, a large crowd clustered about a low marble table on which a single enormous silver punchbowl stood, its sides decorated with fauns and satyrs pursuing each other endlessly around its sides. Fully three feet in height, it was filled with a ruby-colored punch flavored with pomegranate nectar laced with brandy and garnished with orchid blossoms from the baron's own greenhouses. At its side, a ravishingly beautiful dark-haired girl wielding a large silver-ladle filled and refilled the goblets held out to her by a host of admiring gentlemen and officers, all of whom could scarcely take their eyes from her tightly fitting uniform, her white teeth and sensuous smile. What a beauty, Zoltan marveled, though he'd seen her at other affairs.

So the baron too had chosen Gerard Vaugirard, Vienna's most exclusive and eminent chef, to provide food and drink for his honored guests. And no wonder, for Vaugirard certainly did set a delectable table. Zoltan cast his eyes up and down the long tables laden with chilled pigeon breasts; vegetables cleverly carved in the shapes of turtles, stars, and rose blossoms; jellied eels in aspic; mounds of chestnuts in honey sauce; phalanxes of tiny sausages, each wrapped with a strip of scallion; strudels of quince; poppyseed tarts; herrings in mustard sauce; kumquats and wild cherries glacé; ranks of Belgian endives with a lemon and pepper dip; coconut ices garnished with slices of candied ginger; mushrooms stuffed with anchovy paste; huge Turkish olives; green grapes dipped in dark chocolate; a veritable army of chilled oysters, rushed at great expense from the cold waters off Rügen this very afternoon; and a dazzling array of other delights. Zoltan reminded himself of his too-tight cummerbund (cursed device) as he passed over a charming menagerie of marzipan animals to pluck, with a silver skewer, a small pickled tomato.

Relishing its sourness, he stepped into the partial shadows of the colonnaded area at the side of the dance floor where, among potted ferns and small palms, guests conversed, joked, and whispered to each other. He stepped quickly out of the path of a beautiful blonde girl in a purple gown who rushed, sobbing, toward the loggia, a handkerchief held to her face. Young lovers and their eternal upsets. Zoltan sighed.

"That boring creature! Don't be foolish, Louisa, I wouldn't dream of accepting his invitation. He's so vulgar, so common."

"I swear it's true, my dear. Only last Thursday I spotted him slipping into her private box at the opera, after he'd told his father he was going home with a headache."

"So there I was, Claus, hanging by my blessed fingertips from the terrace, while the colonel raged about above me, swearing his Matilda had been with a lover not a moment before! A close call."

Returning to the grand ballroom, he paused to greet his old friend Willi Hupfauff, a junior minister in the Ministry of Education and a fine violinist. On Saturday afternoons, Willi and Zoltan played together in an amateur string quartet.

"Ah, Zoltan! I've been considering that passage from the *allegro* of Haydn's 'Lark' quartet. Perhaps it should be bowed differently, like this." Humming the theme softly, Willi moved his arm up and down in demonstration.

"Perhaps, Willi." Zoltan considered. "But then how do I play my *pizzicato* figure in the cello part? It requires a different accentuation entirely." Humming the cello part with its vigorous accents, Zoltan gestured extravagantly with his bowing arm, playing an imaginary cello. His large elbow jostled a tall man standing next to them.

"I beg your pardon, sir," Zoltan apologized. "I was showing my friend something on my cello," he added sheepishly.

With an irritated nod of acknowledgment, the tall man strode away, shaking his head.

Before he could resume his conversation with Willi, Zoltan saw to his left a disturbance at a table where half a dozen well-dressed people sat. A tall white-haired matron looked about her in puzzlement, while a man at her side pushed back his chair and began to peer beneath the table.

"By the blood of Saint Balthazar," Zoltan muttered, leaving his astonished friend and stepping nimbly through the crowd to the group clustered about the table. "Is there a problem, madam?" he inquired solicitously.

"No, my good man, no assistance is required," answered a portly man with a pince-nez, who fell silent as Zoltan drew back his lapel to reveal, for a moment, his large silver badge of authority.

"My bracelet, inspector," the lady said in a distraught tone. "I've lost it, somehow."

"Are you absolutely sure you wore it, Agatha?" a neighbor asked, inanely.

"Of course she did," the gentleman searching the floor responded with annoyance. "I fastened it myself, earlier this evening."

"Please describe it to me, madam," Zoltan said, making a calming gesture to the woman.

She glanced in confusion at her now bare wrist. "It was an amethyst bracelet, an inheritance from my beloved aunt, Lady Anhang. Amethysts, with small pearls, set in gold filigree. It's an old bracelet, and has been in the family for several generations."

"I see," Zoltan sighed. "Let us adjourn to the upstairs salon, madam. I must have all the details, as best you can remember." Indicating the kneeling husband, who continued his futile search beneath the table, he asked gently, "Will you join us, sir, I beg you?"

"Certainly. Certainly, inspector," the man grumbled, dusting his hands as he stood up.

A scant half hour later an ill-humored Zoltan strode along the corridor leading back to the ballroom, twisting his mustache thoughtfully. As he had expected, the woman and her foolish husband, an inspector of the Imperial waterworks, had been able to tell him nothing: they were not even aware of when the bracelet might have been taken. It might have disappeared from her wrist a full hour before she noticed its absence. Bother! Quickening his pace with new determination, Zoltan reminded himself that at least he now knew for a certainty that somewhere amongst these richly dressed couples and polished corridors his thief, his quarry, whoever he might be, was a guest, albeit an unwanted one, at the baron's ball.

Nodding his head in time to the animated Slavic themes of Strauss's "Eljen à Magyar" polka, Zoltan made his way down the wide corridor, which led past roomy, opulently furnished smoking rooms paneled in dark mahogany, airy salons with pastel-colored walls hung with old tapestries of hunting scenes, and sitting rooms where exotic plants and brightly-colored Oriental screens provided intimate corners for those of the baron's guests in search of intimacy. Could his thief, perhaps, be lingering here? Not likely, he concluded. Not as favorable a place for an ingenious robbery as the dimly lit dance floor, crowded with people and awash with the exciting strains of Strauss. Of course, no really skilled thief, even a pickpocket, relied too heavily on favorable conditions for his success. Technique, make no mistake, was as important to a pickpocket or jewel snatcher as it was to a cellist or a tightrope artist, and every thief spent years honing and perfecting those techniques,

like a musician practicing scales or an acrobat practicing a backwards somersault. It was, Zoltan knew, an exacting and unforgiving trade. He remembered the extreme delicacy with which his old antagonist Zaslavski the Cossack was able to unhook complicated catches and, without its wearer's feeling the slightest twitch, remove and pocket a heavy necklace of rubies or topazes. That was technique! Or what of the Frenchman, Anastase Dacier, whose most celebrated accomplishment had been stealing a jeweled Breguet watch from the pocket of the mayor of Prague during his investiture at the cathedral? Oh, Dacier had been a master, a true master, by the palate of St. Pusina! To use the term "pickpocket" to refer to him was like calling Vienna a village. And what would one call that extraordinary man whose abilities Zoltan had witnessed some ten years ago in Constantinople, a magician by trade, but with a trace of larceny in him, who eked out a living performing in a smoky, poorly lit nightclub? The occasion was vivid in Zoltan's recollection: he had been invited by a colleague, an inspector of the Turkish police, to witness the man's nightly performance. He and Zoltan, seated on uncomfortable chairs, had sipped powerful, aromatic *arak* while a succession of callipygian belly dancers gyrated sweatily about the dim nightclub. At last a small, dark-haired man with a neatly trimmed mustache and a faint smile stepped onto a platform at one end of the crowded room. With mild interest, the crowd watched as he began a series of feats of prestidigitation, feats unlike any Zoltan had witnessed before or since. His small dark eyes never still, "The Unparalleled Pelligrini," as he was billed, began by pulling gold coins from the air: not just one or two but a stack of them, which jingled merrily as he pocketed them. Next he produced a string of objects from the pocket of his silk vest: a cooing turtledove, then its mate; a toad, which he promptly changed into a silken scarf at the request of a lady in the front row; a pair of yellow roses, one of which he presented, bowing deeply, to the same lady, the other of which was waved in the air and became, instantly, a shower of silver sequins that fell into the magician's hair and onto the small stage. The crowd applauded vigorously; Zoltan and his companion watched with increasing fascination. Pelligrini borrowed a spoon from a patron, tossed it high into the air, and caught instead a huge scimitar with a razor-sharp blade, which he returned to the amazed man. Next, Pelligrini poured a full pitcher of *arak* into a tiny golden thimble, then folded a small linen napkin into a tiny package which, when unfolded,

had grown to the size of a large tablecloth. Leaving the stage, he began to circulate among the tables of admiring patrons, pulling coins from their collars, whole eggs from beneath their folded napkins, changing ordinary objects on the littered tables into flowers, lighted candles, and brightly-feathered birds. Approaching the table where Zoltan and his colleague sat, he nodded to them.

"Good evening, gentlemen," he said smilingly. "I see you have mislaid your gloves." Reaching into Zoltan's suit pocket, so lightly that he felt virtually no disturbance of the cloth, Pelligrini withdrew the yellow gloves belonging to Zoltan's companion.

"What! Pavel, how did they come to be in my pocket?" Zoltan exclaimed. Pavel chuckled, his eyes still on Pelligrini.

Handing the gloves to their owner, he reached again into Zoltan's coat, and this time withdrew a silver fork, immediately recognizable as the tableware of the nightclub. Laughter rose from the nearby tables.

"Ah, I expect the manager will reward me for returning this to him," Pelligrini said loudly under Zoltan's bewildered gaze.

"I assure you . . ." Zoltan began, only to be silenced by a nudge from Pavel.

"Extraordinary," he breathed, as Pelligrini returned to the stage. Loud applause filled the small club, and Pelligrini, plainly delighted with his audience's approval, bowed repeatedly. Suddenly a look of puzzlement came over his face. Reaching into the same vest pocket that had already produced roses, toads, and doves, he drew forth a heavy bracelet, whose tiny diamonds glittered in the stage lights.

"My bracelet!" a woman seated at a table across the room gasped.

Smiling, Pelligrini passed the bracelet to the woman's startled companion, a prosperous looking American. Reaching again into his vest, he pulled out a large gold watch, with fob and chain attached.

"Now where might this have come from?" Pelligrini asked, examining its enameled case.

"It's mine, I think!" a young man shouted, rummaging in his watch pocket. "Yes, decidedly it's mine!" The watch, too, was returned to its confused owner.

From Pelligrini's pocket followed a succession of rings, watches, purses, cufflinks, stickpins, and brooches belonging to the nightclub's patrons, who began to check their pockets and clothing in alarm as each item was held up by the smiling magician.

"What might this be?" Pelligrini wondered, holding aloft a large silver badge incised with the eagle of Imperial Vienna. "In need of a little polish, I fear."

"My badge!" Zoltan roared in astonishment, recognizing the emblem of his authority which he always wore securely pinned to the inside of his lapel. "By the forelock of Saint Fridolin! How does he do these things, Pavel?" he blustered, making his way to the stage where Pelligrini bowed graciously and handed the badge back to him, catching his eye with (Zoltan thought) a mocking wink.

What a remarkable evening that had been! Zoltan recalled his unpleasant feelings of anger, awe, and bewilderment at being the butt of Pelligrini's staggering abilities as a pickpocket. How *had* the man managed to reach into his lapel without his being aware of it?

According to Pavel, Pelligrini had been doing this same act for about three years in various clubs around Constantinople. No, although Pavel kept a close watch on the man; he had never been suspected of exercising his skills as a prestidigitator for any gain other than a meagre fee and occasional tips. Apparently his monumental talents as a pickpocket were practiced only for the sake of their art, not for profit.

It had been years since he'd heard from his old friend, Pavel. He would write to him this week, Zoltan resolved, and catch up on all the recent doings in Constantinople. For the moment, though, he had problems of his own: chiefly a skilled thief who had pocketed over two hundred and fifty thousand florins in jewelry and gems in a short sixteen months. The noise and voices of the ballroom again enveloped him as the cymbals and military percussion of Von Suppe's "Imperial Polka" clattered to a cadence and the flush-faced dancers paused momentarily.

"Another polka!" a tall artilleryman called out. His arm encircled the plump waist of a redhaired girl, the daughter of Herr Lippenstadt, the banker. The size of her dowry, Zoltan mused, probably made the defects of her figure seem purely inconsequential, even to an artilleryman.

"What do you mean, you won't present me to her? You've no further interest, Werner, now that you've Ingrid to occupy your nights. Why not share your old flame with your old classmate?"

"Can you believe he would dare to bring that hussy of a cabaret singer to the baron's ball? Still, I've heard it on good authority that she has the finest thighs in all Austria."

"Done! Five thousand florins says Meyerhoff's stallion will leave the others breathing his dust this Saturday!"

"It's agreed, then. You engage the old aunt in conversation while I spirit Veronica away to the shadows of the verandah. I'll repay you this favor, sport!"

A tall, impassive attendant at the door of the entrance to the loggia, one of Zoltan's men, made an imperceptible gesture to his chief, which Zoltan acknowledged with a small nod. All the entrances and possible escape routes from the palace, from the gardener's gate at the back of the extensive grounds to the main entrance with its marble stairs and erect cavalymen, were now under the meticulous scrutiny of Zoltan's junior inspectors, who were authorized to detain, question, and search any person not known to them who attempted to leave the premises. This was a step Zoltan knew would probably cause complaints to be lodged with the prefecture and perhaps with the Baron von Opitz himself by affronted guests, but it was just possible the thief might be caught in that net. He had to admit, though, that it had not been successful on other occasions involving this particular thief. Oh, to be sure, the man was not only possessed of special skills, but he was deuced clever to boot. How did he manage, in the first place, to gain admittance to Vienna's most important and exclusive social affairs? That itself was quite a feat, given the efficiency of Zoltan's men in screening crowds. Once inside, he was somehow able to mingle with the guests as an equal, conversing, flirting, drinking, without appearing at all out of place. Maintaining that facade was far beyond the abilities of most pickpockets. And on top of that, he had somehow been able, in every case, to slip the purloined rings, watches, cigarette cases, necklaces, and brooches through Zoltan's most observant and meticulous police cordons without detection. Did he *swallow* them? Zoltan marveled.

The Countess of Thuringia, surrounded by a gaggle of equally elderly ladies, wheezed past in a cloud of violet perfume, her mouth smeared with chocolate from a rich torte she was devouring with ill-concealed relish. Trying to ignore the tightness of his cummerbund, Zoltan hastened over to the tables of Vaugirard's exquisite delicacies where, after a moment's hesitation, he selected a golden crepe filled with chestnut paste and apricot jam. He ate greedily, closing his eyes in pleasure. Just one wouldn't matter.

Maestro Strauss, sensing a subtle change in the mood of his vast audience, began to lead his orchestra away from the frenetic polkas

and the fast-tempo waltzes to more stately, lyrical waltzes where the violins dominated the brass. The dancing couples pressed closer to each other as they circled the vast marble floor.

Thirsty, Zoltan pushed his way into the throng about the huge silver punchbowl, on whose sides the finely worked fauns and satyrs capered in timeless metallic lust. He took up an empty goblet and held it out at arm's length, through a forest of arms extended in the direction of the lovely gypsy girl. She joked and laughed, displaying her fine teeth as she filled one goblet after another with her silver ladle.

"May I have an orchid in my punch, darling?" a tall man asked playfully. "I've heard that eating orchids makes one a better lover."

"I wouldn't know about that, sir," she replied with a tinkling laugh. "I've been told they can make you prematurely bald."

"Then I suppose I needn't worry if you should give me an orchid," Zoltan spoke up, looking admiringly at her. She caught sight of his nearly bald pate and laughed in agreement as she filled his goblet with the ruby liquid.

"I'm sure once you had almost as much hair as I," she said, shaking her own wonderfully full mass of hair in demonstration.

Zoltan walked away with a pleased smile. He started at the strength of the punch. Blast! He'd be of no use at all as an inspector if he finished this goblet. No wonder the ballroom was taking on a certain bacchanalian frenzy. With a sigh, he placed the half-finished goblet on a tray borne by a passing attendant. From across the room his eye caught sight of his junior sergeant, Grillparzer, gesticulating excitedly in his direction over the heads of the dancing populace.

"By the earlobes of Saint Euphrosyne," he fumed. "What now?" He hurried in the direction of Grillparzer, muttering apologies to those he shouldered aside in his difficult progress across the dance floor.

"Where did it happen?" he hissed at Grillparzer. "In the ballroom, or in the salons? Quick, man, out with it!" Young Grillparzer, his eyes wide in excitement, explained in a rush, while his chief nodded attentively: Lady Fischgau, while sampling the caviar, had noticed with some surprise that her elaborate coiffure, product of one of Vienna's best salons, felt suddenly lighter—by some three hundred carats—corresponding to the weight of her large tiara. A well-known jewel, it consisted of a single baroque pearl the size of a pigeon's egg, ringed by three dozen small rubies, a gift of his Su-

preme Excellency Czar Nicholas, no less, and from the workshops of the inestimable Fabergé. Probably worth, Zoltan calculated, ten or twelve years of his salary.

Grillparzer was quickly dispatched with Zoltan's instructions: Captain Erdner was to question Lady Fischgau in the upstairs salon, out of the way of other guests, and if anything was learned, the information should be relayed to him immediately. Things were happening too quickly for him to leave the floor. Precious little they'd be likely to find out from Lady Fischgau, he snorted. From thousands of similar interviews, he had discovered that most people walk about this earth with eyes half closed, ears muffled, and minds half asleep. No wonder a clever thief ran rings around them, the innocents.

From the podium came the delightful strains of the "Seraglio Waltz." Some of the gaslights had been discreetly extinguished, though whether by the baron's men or by the guests themselves, Zoltan did not know. Not a few of the older celebrants, tired from their exertions on the dance floor, their stomachs comfortably full of the baron's punch and delicacies, had retired to his spacious drawing rooms and salons, settling themselves into brocaded settees and armchairs for card games, conversation, or naps.

A bad night, and just half over, Zoltan thought. Two snatches, the last one a real coup. Stroking his mustache with one hand, he passed along the length of the refreshment tables. The depredations of the baron's guests were now apparent, and Vaugirard's carefully composed, colorful caloric cornucopias were now sadly disordered. Spearing himself a fig from a partly dismembered gingerbread cake, Zoltan caught the eye of a uniformed man folding napkins who moved to serve him and who then, with a disapproving glance, went back to folding napkins.

Why did they have to lower those lights, anyway? It just made his already difficult task that much more difficult. He paused to watch, once again, the gypsy girl serving punch from the seemingly inexhaustible silver punchbowl. Would she recognize him if he went back for another goblet of that punch? Maybe he'd ask for an orchid, just to prod her memory a bit.

To his surprise, he noticed a splash at the rim of the giant punchbowl as someone poured back an unfinished portion of punch from a goblet. How terribly unsanitary! He made a mental note to drink only Vichy water for the rest of the evening. He looked carefully, but could no longer distinguish the hand that had held the goblet

from the gaggle of other hands and goblets waving over the bowl.

Turning away to continue his circuit of the ballroom, Zoltan allowed his gaze to follow the taffeta-wrapped, beribboned posterior of the Viscountess of Glogau as she waltzed gaily past, her partner completely enveloped in the billowing yards of fabric that her gown comprised.

"Oh yes, we did have an affair, Karin, three summers ago, but I was so young then, so young! I can't even recall what it was I found attractive in him."

"Amelia, I will not permit you to dance each and every dance with Lieutenant Waldmeissen. You *must* circulate. If your father were to hear of it, he would fly into a perfect rage, you know that."

"Is it true, as I've heard, that his stepmother allows him only a thousand florins a month until he marries? A great pity."

Zoltan scanned the dancers and the loiterers carefully, hoping to catch the slightest movement that might signal the activities of the thief: an unexpected gleam from a gem disappearing into a vest pocket or an unusual disturbance in the lace and satin bows decorating the bodice of a virginal debutante. He was certainly at a disadvantage in this duel, for his sharp perceptions, carefully honed by his years of experience, could never cover a crowd of this size. It was always possible, though, that he might be at the scene of a snatch as soon as it occurred, for with a skilled pickpocket only a few seconds were necessary to secrete a necklace or earring safely out of sight and melt into the throng that was his camouflage.

The Duke of Sardinia minced by, waltzing with a young blonde girl who listened attentively as he whispered to her. Zoltan caught a whiff of a pungent cigar, and turned to catch sight of the financier, Zwickauer, puffing an enormous Havana while he conversed with several sharp-eyed younger men. Zoltan made a gesture to one of his men who leaned against a nearby column, indicating the cigar. He would see to it the man was firmly led to the smoking lounge.

"That's her, in green. The harlot who used to model for the painter Karpeles. She's now the mistress of a Bosnian count who comes to Vienna only on weekends. He's content with leftovers, apparently."

"Never have daughters, Wolfgang. That's my advice. Since puberty my five have given me such trouble that I've developed ulcers and uncontrollable headaches. Young girls today are nothing like what they were when you and I were courting, make no mistake about it."

Zoltan saw, through a brief opening in the swirling masses of dancers, his friend Willi Hupfauff, conversing animatedly with Karel Poskovsky, conductor of the State Opera and a mutual friend. How he wished he were here on a different mission and could join them in their discussion, which he knew without question concerned music. He owed poor Willi an apology for having rushed off so suddenly earlier. Bother!

Standing beside the long colonnade at the side of the dance floor, he cast his gaze along the groups of resting dancers, the men mopping their brows with silk handkerchiefs, the women fanning themselves, laughing, teasing, whispering to each other as they waited to rejoin the dance. In one group, a middle-aged woman in a brilliant orange gown broke off a conversation with several other women and half turned toward the deeper shadows behind her, as if someone had spoken to her or tapped her on the shoulder. Evidently not, for a second later she turned back to the group, resuming her conversation with hardly an interruption.

Zoltan started. In that brief moment when she had turned away from the gaslights, something had happened: her large brooch, a carved antique emerald set with a ring of seed pearls, was gone. Its disappearance had been noticed, also, by one of the woman's companions, who pointed excitedly at her lapel.

Zoltan launched himself forward with a speed and a suddenness that startled several loungers near him. He lunged around the group, one of whom looked about worriedly for assistance. Desperately hoping for a glimpse of the thief as he slipped away, Zoltan dashed around a column and a potted fern. Damn! Too late! Only a couple, embracing against a column in the deepest shadows, and an elderly gentleman draining the last dregs from a goblet of punch, his arm upraised and his head thrown back.

Zoltan stood stock still, while a look of astonishment spread rapidly over his countenance.

"By the clavicles of St. Cunigonde!" he whispered aloud. Slapping one large fist into an equally large palm with a resounding smack, which drew a bewildered look from the embracing couple, he whirled about and ran across the crowded dance floor, oblivious to the melodious french horns of the "Heloise and Abelard Waltz." Ignoring the dancers, who jerked to one side or another in panic to avoid his headlong rush, he hurried towards the tables of food and drink, nearly knocking over a tall man who was too slow in clearing a path for him.

"Pardon me, I must pass!"

"Excuse me, an emergency!"

"To your left, madam, I must pass through!"

A moment later, breathing heavily, he stood before the table bearing the gargantuan silver punchbowl where the dark girl, as she had all evening, filled the guests' proffered goblets. Grillparzer, who had followed in his ample wake across the dance floor, joined him.

"Watch!" Zoltan hissed at him.

"Watch what?" the puzzled lieutenant croaked back, following his chief's wide-eyed gaze, riveted on the forest of goblets waving over the punchbowl as first one, then another, was filled from the silver ladle.

"The goblets, the goblets!" Zoltan whispered in annoyance.

For a few moments the pair—Grillparzer with a completely bewildered expression, his chief staring intently, his large body tensed in expectation—stood motionless while an assortment of hands and arms, some with cuffs of military braid, others with pale-colored kid gloves or lace-trimmed shirtsleeves, waved gleaming goblets in the direction of the punchbowl, and the silver ladle dipped again and again into the shimmering ruby-colored liquid.

"There," Zoltan whispered hoarsely, as one goblet, at the extreme edge of the punchbowl's circumference, was suddenly inverted, its contents poured into the bowl.

Both men sprang into movement like windup toys suddenly released. Covering the distance to the punchbowl in three strides, Zoltan shouldered aside half a dozen men.

"Hey, there!"

"No need to shove!" a young officer shouted.

"If you please," a loud voice bellowed in his ear. "What is the meaning of this unseemly violence?"

Which hand had held that goblet? This one? No, there! Pushing hard to one side, he seized in his powerful grip a velvet-clad arm holding an empty goblet.

"If you push me again, so help me, I'll get angry," the officer warned.

"Kindly release my arm, inspector." Zoltan heard an imperious, all-too-familiar voice. By the foot of Saint Photina, he thought despairingly, recognizing the prim and withered visage of Kirschenbaum, marshal of the Royal Guards, a man he had always disliked.

"I beg your pardon, Excellency," he apologized in a rush, releasing his grasp and seizing another in its place, next to it.

"Let go, you fool!" the owner of the arm cried in anger. "It is I, Peter Buschke!" The shrill, feminine tones of the mayor's eldest son were unmistakable, even in the increasing babble about them. He let go.

Zoltan turned to Grillparzer. "We have missed him. He was too quick, again. By the thumbs of St. Thanatos, he has escaped!" Zoltan cursed bitterly.

Grillparzer snapped his fingers above his head, summoning several of their men, who materialized from the milling crowd.

"Sergeant Fusselschmerz," Grillparzer barked, "alert the cordon to be especially vigilant." The sergeant saluted briskly, spun on his heel, and hurried off.

Zoltan shook his head thoughtfully. "It is probably of no use now. I fear even the most thorough search of the baron's departing guests will be futile. But I'll wager you," he brightened, "that we have recovered his night's winnings."

Unmindful of the throng that had collected about them during the disturbance, Zoltan stepped up to the punchbowl, over which no goblets were now waving.

"Fraulein," he spoke in a carefully controlled voice, addressing the dark gypsy serving girl—whose eyes met his, wide with surprise—"I fear that your punch is contaminated."

"Contaminated!" she stuttered. "It is not so, sir."

"What nonsense is this, inspector?" interjected the mayor's son.

"This punch is, I assure you, contaminated," Zoltan said grimly, still watching the gypsy girl, whose eyes now showed, he thought, a trace of fear. "With the authority of the Imperial Prefecture, I impound it."

From the circle about them, Gerard Vaugirard, the master chef and caterer, stepped forward, his heavy brows glowering, his face ruddy with anger.

"Inspector, this is an abomination!" he hissed. "And I will not, I assure you, stand for it!"

Ignoring him, Zoltan whispered a few terse commands to Grillparzer, who hurried away and returned a few moments later accompanied by three of Zoltan's uniformed men, each carrying a large brass spittoon borrowed from one of the salons. In response to Zoltan's curt gesture, these were placed on the floor before the punchbowl.

"Now, my dear," he said gently, "the ladle, if you please."

For a second she hesitated, her full lower lip trembling slightly; then she extended the long handle of the heavy silver ladle to Zoltan. As he took it, she broke down suddenly into soft sobs and turned away, raising her hands to her face.

Under the intent gaze of twoscore inquisitive guests, one tearful serving girl, and one livid chef, Zoltan proceeded to systematically empty the enormous punchbowl, standing on tiptoe as the level of the aromatic liquid fell lower and lower. Methodically, careful not to spill the scarlet liquid on himself or the baron's polished floor, he poured ladle after ladle from the bowl into the three spittoons. The watching throng fell gradually silent as his rhythmic exertions continued. The only sounds were the distant babble of the rest of the ballroom, the quiet sobs of the gypsy girl, and the bell-like ringing of the ladle against the sides of the bowl as Zoltan dipped, poured, dipped, poured.

"By Saint Fatima's blessed fingernails," he cried exultantly, nearly losing his balance as he stood to peer over the side of the bowl, "I knew it must be!"

He raised the ladle and held it out. There, in the bottom, half submerged in the rosy fluid, gleamed an enormous white baroque pearl ringed by rubies even redder than the punch itself: Lady Fischgau's famous Fabergé tiara.

"What do you have to say to that?" Zoltan cried triumphantly, looking meaningfully at the astonished Vaugirard, who stared, speechless, at the glittering circlet, folded tightly together on its beautifully worked hinges.

Handing it to Grillparzer, who gingerly unfolded it, Zoltan raised himself on tiptoes and again plunged the ladle into the depths of the punchbowl. A moment later, he offered the ladle again to the gaze of the excited crowd.

"An exceedingly rich mixture, eh, Grillparzer?" He chortled at his own witticism. The ladle held an ornately chased gold cigarette case, set with a cluster of sapphires. Wiping it dry with his monogrammed handkerchief, Zoltan peered closely at the coat of arms worked on the case in yellow and white gold. "This crest: *une fasces d'or, trois étoiles* . . . a motto: '*cum bono est.*' Of course!" he chuckled.

"Ansbacher," Zoltan called. "Fetch the Baron von Stauffenstein. Tell him," he added wryly, "that we have recovered the cigarette case he hasn't yet missed."

The next dip of the ladle into the now nearly empty punchbowl brought up the carved emerald brooch, the following one a large opal ring, and the final one, the lovely bracelet of amethyst and seed pearls set in gold filigree, belonging to Lady Anhang's niece; the gem that had marked the beginning of this most eventful evening.

"And now, my dear," he said, turning to the forlorn gypsy girl, who stood, red-eyed, between two tall junior inspectors, "you must tell us how this all came about." Sensing her fear and seeing her youth, he softened. Placing a hand gently on her shoulder, he leaned closer.

"We know, my girl, that you are only an accomplice," he said soothingly. "You will not be held responsible. Please help us to capture the ones responsible. Was it the Frenchman, Jules Letard?"

She shook her head, vigorously.

"Or Michaelis, from Munich?" No. "The Spaniard, Valderrabaño, with a scar, here?" he gestured. No. Zoltan thought deeply for a moment. "Not Randolph, the Englishman with bad teeth and an upperclass accent?" The girl continued to shake her head as Zoltan, with increasing disquiet, named all the pickpockets he knew, or had read of.

"Surely not the American, Harry the Horse?" he asked, naming a jewel thief who had recently made headlines in New York for his successes.

"No, no!" she cried, in exasperation. "Pelligrini! Armando Pelligrini!"

All those standing near Zoltan heard his loud, slow intake of breath, and some saw his large hands clench into fists, then relax.

Slowly at first, her eyes averted, the girl told her story, and what she knew of Pelligrini's. Zoltan listened attentively, nodding occasionally, several times asking brief questions in an interested voice.

Though reluctant to speak of his past, Pelligrini had told the girl a great deal, it turned out. After nearly fourteen years as a performer in Constantinople's nightclubs, Pelligrini had quarreled with his current employer, who had had him arrested on a trumped-up charge. Released after six months in one of Turkey's most sordid jails, Pelligrini vowed he would never work again as an entertainer; instead, he would put his extraordinary skills as a pickpocket to use. It was easy to lift a few pieces of jewelry at a busy outdoor market; selling them to a one-eyed jewel dealer was no more dif-

ficult. He bought a one-way ticket to Sofia, Bulgaria, and soon went after more profitable game. Sporting a finely tailored dress suit, a silk cravat, and patent leather boots, he mingled with the local gentry at hotels, restaurants, concerts, and racetracks. His first really important theft was made at a reception for the Russian ambassador, where he was able to pocket a heavy string of perfectly matched emerald beads from an inebriated Italian contessa. A week later, though, followed by a suspicious palace guard into a birthday party for the Crown Prince, he had bungled an attempt to steal a jeweled box and was forced to flee, ignominiously, over the back fence, chased by a score of guards. Having learned a valuable lesson, Pelligrini moved on to Trieste (where he had great success among the fashionable crowds who promenaded the quays on Sundays), then to Zagreb (where he had been challenged to a duel by the husband of an heiress he had an affair with), Brno and Prague (where he had become involved with a group of revolutionaries and was forced to flee, disguised as a British lord).

Shortly after his arrival in Vienna, he and the girl had met at a coffeehouse in the theater district. At first he had pretended to be a partner in a cinnamon importing firm, but soon they became lovers, and she learned the details of his larcenous profession. It was only after many hours of argument and tearful scenes that she had agreed to use her position as Vaugirard's punch server to facilitate his audacious robberies of Vienna's wealthiest citizens. She herself had never stolen, in her whole life, "as much as a lace handkerchief," she asserted defiantly.

Knowing in advance of the affairs at which Vaugirard would be employed, Pelligrini would use every possible expedient to gain admission. He would steal or forge an invitation or, as a last resort, sneak into the premises disguised as a member of the kitchen staff, with the girl's assistance. Once inside, his extraordinary talents as a pickpocket (no, truly he is a prestidigitator, Zoltan corrected himself) were put to use at every opportunity. Carrying a half-full goblet of punch, he would slip his acquisitions into it, where they were conveniently concealed from view. Rejoining the crowd about the punchbowl, where all eyes were on the charms of his reluctant accomplice, he would empty his goblet with its valuable contents into the bowl, refill it, and melt back into the crowd, alert for any opportunity for thievery.

If searched when leaving, he had nothing to fear, and it was a simple matter, with the girl's cooperation, to retrieve his nightly

winnings from the punchbowl at the end of the evening.

"My dear," Zoltan said sternly, "you have been a participant in these robberies, and you have also been a victim, as much as Lady Fischgau or any others whose property was stolen." He sighed. "You are young, of course, and it cannot be denied that Pelligrini is both handsome and persuasive. I will see to it that your cooperation with the prefecture is taken into account."

"Excuse me, I have an important message for the chief inspector." A large, red-faced man in uniform pushed his way through the dense throng and, facing Zoltan, saluted.

"What is it, Corporal Puterschein?" Zoltan asked, slightly irritated at the interruption.

"Sir," the corporal replied, "one of the guests left this for you, and insisted I deliver it to you immediately." He held out a small bundle wrapped in a silk scarf.

"Which guest, corporal?" Zoltan asked as he slowly undid the silk bow and began to unwind the scarf.

"Well, sir, that isn't easy to say. He was leaving with the Duchess of Bergenschlossen, or so I thought, but he didn't get into her carriage when he reached the portico. No, instead, he helped the duchess into her carriage, whispered some joke into her ear (I know it was a joke because she laughed very loudly), then waved goodbye, came over to where me and Berkow were standing, handed me this, and told me it was something you'd be most grateful to receive. Then," the corporal finished, "he tipped his fine beaver hat and marched down the steps, across the road, and away."

"By the patella of the blessed Saint Polycarp of Phrygia!" Zoltan sputtered, unwrapping the last fold of cloth. "My badge of office!"

In his hand lay a large silver medallion bearing the elaborate Imperial arms, flanked by griffons and a wyvern, with the motto of the prefecture: "*Vivit post funera virtus*. Virtue outlives the grave."

"Needs a little polish," Zoltan muttered to himself.

"Pelligrini's success, up until tonight, is not at all surprising, given his ingenuity," Zoltan commented to Grillparzer as they walked slowly down the grand marble staircase from the baron's palace. "Notice that the accomplice, wisely, was kept to a passive role, and that only the accomplice was in ever in any danger from the possession of the jewels, while Pelligrini himself was only in jeopardy during

the few moments it took to transport them in his goblet from the scene of the snatch to the punchbowl. Quite clever, quite clever."

Willi Hupfauß leaned from the door of his coach to call to Zoltan. "Bring the music for the Haydn with you on Saturday, Zoltan. We'll try it once again, agreed?"

With a nod and a wave, Zoltan acknowledged him as the coach pulled away into the darkness. The rain had dwindled to a fine mist that obscured the street and the sculpted fronts of the grand homes lining the Prinzenstrasse.

"Go easy in your interrogation of the girl, Stefan," Zoltan leaned closer to the younger man. "See that she's released with a reprimand in a few days; holding her would serve no useful purpose. Question her closely about Pelligrini's personal habits, though: who are his acquaintances, what restaurants, beer cellars, and dance halls did he frequent; what were his peculiarities of dress, speech, and body? Even the most trifling scrap of information about our man may prove valuable to us, in the end. Tomorrow, search that flat he and the girl shared in Rindestrasse, but I don't expect much to come of it. For the immediate future, of course, Pelligrini is smart enough to stay in hiding; or perhaps he will leave town. Have the trains and coach stops watched, as usual."

Zoltan pulled a frayed woolen cap over his balding head and sighed. "Truly I fear that we have not seen or heard the last of this man Pelligrini. He is simply too skilled, too audacious, and too dangerous. We are dealing with no common criminal, that I'll swear!"

"All in all, Wolfgang," burbled a fur-clad matron as she waited with her husband for their coach to be brought around, "this was one of the baron's most successful balls in years, don't you agree?"

"As you say, my dear. As you say."

UNSOLVED

by
Aaron J. Friedland

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the February issue.

"I believe you are unfamiliar with the penal system in our country," said the warden as he led the new prisoner to his cell. "We find that it improves prison morale for each prisoner to have a chance to end his sentence at any time. In your case, we have set up a combination lock on your cell door. There are ten dials, on which you can set up any ten-digit number. If you set up the right one, the cell door will unlock and you will be free to leave."

"I see," said the prisoner. "Then if I try every possible number, I'm sure to hit the right one."

"True," said the warden, "but even if you were able to change the numbers at the rate of one per second without rest, it would still take you a hundred years to hit the right combination. However, you could try numbers at random and have a chance of choosing the right one. Or, you could search for the clue which we always provide."

"What sort of clue?"

"Well, it might be almost anything. For example, one of our prisoners was put in an escape-proof cell and told that he would be pardoned if he could break out. He was also given permission to keep any plants he wished in his cell."

"What became of him?"

The warden chuckled. "After more than two years, he suddenly realized that some words may have more than one meaning. He requested a poison ivy plant. Soon after receiving it, he broke out—in a rash. Naturally, he received his pardon."

The warden unlocked the cell and ushered the prisoner in. "Your cell contains a desk calculator and writing implements. Good luck."

The prisoner was left alone. He tried a few combinations on the lock without success. What could the clue be? A thought struck him. It seemed worth a try. He made a few calculations, and then set up a number on the lock. The cell door opened and the prisoner strolled out, after serving less than an hour of his sentence.

What number did he try?

See page 148 for the solution to the Mid-December puzzle.

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FICTION



RIDE THE LIGHTNING

by John Lutz

A slanted sheet of rain swept like a scythe across Placid Cove Trailer Park. For an instant, an intricate web of lightning illuminated the park. The rows of mobile homes loomed square and still and pale against the night, reminding Nudger of tombs with awnings and TV antennas. He held his umbrella at a sharp angle to the wind as he walked, putting a hand in his pocket to pull out a scrap of paper and double-check the address he was trying to find in the maze of trailers. Finally, at the end of Tranquility Lane, he

Illustration by Eric Marcus

found Number 307 and knocked on its metal door.

"I'm Nudger," he said when the door opened.

For several seconds the woman in the doorway stood staring out at him, rain blowing in beneath the metal awning to spot her cornflower-colored dress and ruffle her straw-blonde hair. She was tall but very thin, fragile-looking, and appeared at first glance to be about twelve years old. Second glance revealed her to be in her mid-twenties. She had slight crow's feet at the corners of her luminous blue eyes when

she winced as a raindrop struck her face, a knowing cast to her oversized, girlish, full-lipped mouth, and slightly buck teeth. Her looks were hers alone. There was no one who could look much like her, no middle ground with her; men would consider her scrawny and homely, or they would see her as uniquely sensuous. Nudger liked coltish girl-women; he catalogued her as attractive.

"Whoeee!" she said at last, as if seeing for the first time beyond Nudger. "Ain't it raining something terrible?"

"It is," Nudger agreed. "And on me."

Her entire thin body gave a quick, nervous kind of jerk as she smiled apologetically. "I'm Holly Ann Adams, Mr. Nudger. And you are getting wet, all right. Come on in."

She moved aside and Nudger stepped up into the trailer. He expected it to be surprisingly spacious; he'd once lived in a trailer and remembered them as such. This one was cramped and confining. The furniture was cheap and its upholstery was threadbare; a portable black and white TV on a tiny table near the Scotch-plaid sofa was blaring shouts of ecstasy emitted by "The Price is Right" contestants. The air was thick with the smell of something greasy that had been fried too long.

Holly Ann cleared a stack of

People magazines from a vinyl chair and motioned for Nudger to sit down. He folded his umbrella, left it by the door, and sat. Holly Ann started to say something, then jerked her body in that peculiar way of hers, almost a twitch, as if she'd just remembered something not only with her mind but with her blood and muscle, and walked over and switched off the noisy television. In the abrupt silence, the rain seemed to beat on the metal roof with added fury. "Now we can talk," Holly Ann proclaimed, sitting opposite Nudger on the undersized sofa. "You a sure-enough private investigator?"

"I'm that," Nudger said. "Did someone recommend me to you, Miss Adams?"

"Gotcha out of the Yellow Pages. And if you're gonna work for me, it might as well be Holly Ann without the Adams."

"Except on the check," Nudger said.

She grinned a devilish twelve-year-old's grin. "Oh, sure, don't worry none about that. I wrote you out a check already, just gotta fill in the amount. That is, if you agree to take the job. You might not."

"Why not?"

"It has to do with my fiancé, Curtis Colt."

Nudger listened for a few seconds to the rain crashing on the roof. "The Curtis Colt who's

going to be executed next week?"

"That's the one. Only he didn't kill that liquor store woman; I know it for a fact. It ain't right he should have to ride the lightning."

"Ride the lightning?"

"That's what convicts call dying in the electric chair, Mr. Nudger. They call that chair lotsa things: Old Sparky . . . The Lord's Frying Pan. But Curtis don't belong sitting in it wired up, and I can prove it."

"It's a little late for that kind of talk," Nudger said. "Or did you testify for Curtis in court?"

"Nope. Couldn't testify. You'll see why. All them lawyers and the judge and jury don't even know about me. Curtis didn't want them to know, so he never told them." She crossed her legs and swung her right calf jauntily. She was smiling as if trying to flirt him into wanting to know more about the job so he could free Curtis Colt by a governor's reprieve at the last minute, as in an old movie.

Nudger looked at her gauntly pretty, country-girl face and said, "Tell me about Curtis Colt, Holly Ann."

"You mean you didn't read about him in the newspapers or see him on the television?"

"I only scan the media for misinformation. Give me the details."

"Well, they say Curtis was inside the liquor store, sticking

it up—him and his partner had done three other places that night, all of 'em gas stations, though—when the old man that owned the place came out of a back room and seen his wife there behind the counter with her hands up and Curtis holding the gun on her. So the old man lost his head and ran at Curtis, and Curtis had to shoot him. Then the woman got mad when she seen that and ran at Curtis, and Curtis shot her. She's the one that died. The old man, he'll live, but he can't talk nor think nor even feed himself."

Nudger remembered more about the case now. Curtis Colt had been found guilty of first degree murder, and because of a debate in the legislature over the merits of cyanide gas versus electricity, the state was breaking out the electric chair to make him its first killer executed by electricity in over a quarter of a century. Those of the back-to-basics school considered that progress.

"They're gonna shoot Curtis full of electricity next Saturday, Mr. Nudger," Holly Ann said plaintively. She sounded like a little girl complaining that the grade on her report card wasn't fair.

"I know," Nudger said. "But I don't see how I can help you. Or, more specifically, help Curtis."

"You know what they say thoughts really are, Mr. Nudger?" Holly Ann said, ignoring his professed helplessness. Her wide blue eyes were vague as she searched for words. "Thoughts ain't really nothing but tiny electrical impulses in the brain. I read that somewhere or other. What I can't help wondering is, when they shoot all that electricity into Curtis, what's it gonna be like to his thinking? How long will it seem like to him before he finally dies? Will there be a big burst of crazy thoughts along with the pain? I know it sounds loony, but I can't help laying awake nights thinking about that, and I feel I just gotta do whatever's left to try and help Curtis."

There was a sort of check-out-line tabloid logic in that, Nudger conceded; if thoughts were actually weak electrical impulses, then high-voltage electrical impulses could become exaggerated, horrible thoughts. Anyway, try to disprove it to Holly Ann.

"They never did catch Curtis's buddy, the driver who sped away and left him in that service station, did they?" Nudger asked.

"Nope. Curtis never told who the driver was, neither, no matter how much he was threatened. Curtis is a stubborn man."

Nudger was getting the idea

"But you know who was driving the car."

"Yep. And he told me him and Curtis was miles away from that liquor store at the time it was robbed. When he seen the police closing in on Curtis in that gas station where Curtis was buying cigarettes, he hit the accelerator and got out of the parking lot before they could catch him. The police didn't even get the car's license plate number."

Nudger rubbed a hand across his chin, watching Holly Ann swing her leg as if it were a shapely metronome. She was barefoot and wearing no nylon hose. "The jury thought Curtis not only was at the liquor store, but that he shot the old man and woman in cold blood."

"That ain't true, though. Not according to—" she caught herself before uttering the man's name.

"Curtis's friend," Nudger finished.

"That's right. And he ought to know," Holly Ann said righteously, as if that piece of information were the trump card and the argument was over.

"None of this means anything unless the driver comes forward and substantiates that he was with Curtis somewhere other than at the liquor store when it was robbed."

Holly Ann nodded and stopped swinging her leg. "I know. But

he won't. He can't. That's where you come in."

"My profession might enjoy a reputation a notch lower than dognapper," Nudger said, "but I don't hire out to do anything illegal."

"What I want you to do *is* legal," Holly Ann said in a hurt little voice. Nudger looked past her into the dollhouse kitchen and saw an empty gin bottle. He wondered if she might be slightly drunk. "It's the eyewitness accounts that got Curtis convicted," she went on. "And those people are wrong. I want you to figure out some way to convince them it wasn't Curtis they saw that night."

"Four people, two of them customers in the store, picked Curtis out of a police lineup."

"So what? Ain't eyewitnesses often mistaken?"

Nudger had to admit that they were, though he didn't see how they could be in this case. There were, after all, four of them. And yet, Holly Ann was right; it was amazing how people could sometimes be so certain that the wrong man had committed a crime just five feet in front of them.

"I want you to talk to them witnesses," Holly Ann said. "Find out *why* they think Curtis was the killer. Then show them how they might be wrong and get them to change what they said. We got the truth on

our side, Mr. Nudger. At least one witness will change his story when he's made to think about it, because Curtis wasn't where they said he was."

"Curtis has exhausted all his appeals," Nudger said. "Even if all the witnesses changed their stories, it wouldn't necessarily mean he'd get a new trial."

"Maybe not, but I betcha they wouldn't kill him. They couldn't stand the publicity if enough witnesses said they was wrong, it was somebody else killed the old woman. Then, just maybe, eventually, he'd get another trial and get out of prison."

Nudger was awed. Here was foolish optimism that transcended even his own. He had to admire Holly Ann.

The leg started pumping again beneath the cornflower-colored dress. When Nudger lowered his gaze to stare at it, Holly Ann said, "So will you help me, Mr. Nudger?"

"Sure. It sounds easy."

“Why should I worry about it any more?"

Randy Gantner asked Nudger, leaning on his shovel. He didn't mind talking to Nudger; it meant a break from his construction job on the new Interstate 170 cloverleaf. "Colt's been found guilty and he's going to the chair, ain't he?"

The afternoon sun was hammering down on Nudger, warming the back of his neck and making his stomach queasy. He thumbed an antacid tablet off the roll he kept in his shirt pocket and popped one of the white disks into his mouth. With his other hand, he was holding up a photograph of Curtis Colt for Gantner to see. It was a snapshot Holly Ann had given him of the wiry, shirtless Colt leaning on a fence post and holding a beer can high in a mock toast: this one's for Death!

"This is a photograph you never saw in court. I just want you to look at it closely and tell me again if you're sure the man you saw in the liquor store was Colt. Even if it makes no difference in whether he's executed, it will help ease the mind of somebody who loves him."

"I'd be a fool to change my story about what happened now that the trial's over," Gantner said logically.

"You'd be a murderer if you really weren't sure."

Gantner sighed, dragged a dirty red handkerchief from his jeans pocket, and wiped his beefy, perspiring face. He peered at the photo, then shrugged. "It's him, Colt, the guy I seen shoot the man and woman when I was standing in the back aisle of the liquor store. If he'd known me and Sanders was back there, he'd have probably zapped us

along with them old folks."

"You're positive it's the same man?"

Gantner spat off to the side and frowned; Nudger was becoming a pest, and the foreman was staring. "I said it to the police and the jury, Nudger; that little twerp Colt did the old lady in. Ask me, he deserves what he's gonna get."

"Did you actually see the shots fired?"

"Nope. Me and Sanders was in the back aisle looking for some reasonable-priced bourbon when we heard the shots, then looked around to see Curtis Colt back away, turn, and run out to the car. Looked like a black or dark green old Ford. Colt fired another shot as it drove away."

"Did you see the driver?"

"Sort of. Skinny dude with curly black hair and a mustache. That's what I told the cops. That's all I seen. That's all I know."

And that was the end of the conversation. The foreman was walking toward them, glaring. *Thunk!* Gantner's shovel sliced deep into the earth, speeding the day when there'd be another place for traffic to get backed up. Nudger thanked him and advised him not to work too hard in the hot sun.

"You wanna help?" Gantner asked, grinning sweatily.

"I'm already doing some dig-

ging of my own," Nudger said, walking away before the foreman arrived.

The other witnesses also stood by their identifications. The fourth and last one Nudger talked with, an elderly woman named Iris Langeneckert, who had been walking her dog near the liquor store and had seen Curtis Colt dash out the door and into the getaway car, said something that Gantner had touched on. When she'd described the getaway car driver, like Gantner she said he was a thin man with curly black hair and a beard or mustache, then she had added, "Like Curtis Colt's hair and mustache."

Nudger looked again at the snapshot Holly Ann had given him. Curtis Colt was about five foot nine, skinny, and mean-looking, with a broad bandito mustache and a mop of curly, greasy black hair. Nudger wondered if it was possible that the getaway car driver had been Curtis Colt himself, and his accomplice had killed the shopkeeper. Even Nudger found that one hard to believe.

He drove to his second-floor office in the near suburb of Maplewood and sat behind his desk in the blast of cold air from the window unit, sipping the complimentary paper cup of iced tea he'd brought up from Danny's Donuts directly below. The sweet smell of the dough-

nuts was heavier than usual in the office; Nudger had never quite gotten used to it and what it did to his sensitive stomach.

When he was cool enough to think clearly again, he decided he needed more information on the holdup, and on Curtis Colt, from a more objective source than Holly Ann Adams. He phoned Lieutenant Jack Hammersmith at home and was told by Hammersmith's son Jed that Hammersmith had just driven away to go to work on the afternoon shift, so it would be a while before he got to his office.

Nudger checked his answering machine, proving that hope did indeed spring eternal in a fool's breast. There was a terse message from his former wife Eileen demanding last month's alimony payment; a solemn-voiced young man reading an address where Nudger could send a check to help pay to form a watchdog committee that would stop the utilities from continually raising their rates; and a cheerful man informing Nudger that with the labels from ten packages of a brand name hot dog he could get a Cardinals ballgame ticket at half price. (That meant eating over eighty hot dogs. Nudger calculated that baseball season would be over by the time he did that.) Everyone seemed to want some of Nudger's money. No one wanted to pay Nudger

any money. Except for Holly Ann Adams. Nudger decided he'd better step up his efforts on the Curtis Colt case.

He-tilted back his head, downed the last dribble of iced tea, then tried to eat what was left of the crushed ice. But the ice clung stubbornly to the bottom of the cup, taunting him. Nudger's life was like that.

He crumpled up the paper cup and tossed it, ice and all, into the wastebasket. Then he went downstairs where his Volkswagen was parked in the shade behind the building and drove east on Manchester, toward downtown and the Third District station house.

Police Lieutenant Jack Hammersmith was in his Third District office, sleek, obese, and cool-looking behind his wide metal desk. He was pounds and years away from the handsome cop who'd been Nudger's partner a decade ago in a two-man patrol car. Nudger could still see traces of a dashing quality in the flesh-upholstered Hammersmith, but he wondered if that was only because he'd known Hammersmith ten years ago.

"Sit down, Nudge," Hammersmith invited, his lips smiling but his slate-gray, cop's eyes unreadable. If eyes were the windows to the soul, his shades were always down.

Nudger sat in one of the straight-backed chairs in front of Hammersmith's desk. "I need some help," he said.

"Sure," Hammersmith said, "you never come see me just to trade recipes or to sit and rock." Hammersmith was partial to irony; it was a good thing, in his line of work.

"I need to know more about Curtis Colt," Nudger said.

Hammersmith got one of his vile greenish cigars out of his shirt pocket and stared intently at it, as if its paper ring label might reveal some secret of life and death. "Colt, eh? The guy who's going to ride the lightning?"

"That's the second time in the past few days I've heard that expression. The first time was from Colt's fiancée. She thinks he's innocent."

"Fiancées think along those lines. Is she your client?"

Nudger nodded but didn't volunteer Holly Ann's name.

"Gullibility makes the world go round," Hammersmith said. "I was in charge of the Homicide investigation on that one. There's not a chance Colt is innocent, Nudge."

"Four eyewitness I.D.'s is compelling evidence," Nudger admitted. "What about the getaway car driver? His description is a lot like Colt's. Maybe he's the one who did the shooting and Colt was the driver."

"Colt's lawyer hit on that. The jury didn't buy it. Neither do I. The man is guilty, Nudge."

"You know how inaccurate eyewitness accounts are," Nudger persisted.

That seemed to get Hammersmith mad. He lit the cigar. The office immediately fogged up.

Nudger made his tone more amicable. "Mind if I look at the file on the Colt case?"

Hammersmith gazed thoughtfully at Nudger through a dense greenish haze. He inhaled, exhaled; the haze became a cloud. "How come this fiancée didn't turn up at the trial to testify for Colt? She could have at least lied and said he was with her that night."

"Colt apparently didn't want her subjected to taking the stand."

"How noble," Hammersmith said. "What makes this fiancée think her prince charming is innocent?"

"She knows he was somewhere else when the shopkeepers were shot."

"But not with her?"

"Nope."

"Well, that's refreshing."

Maybe it was refreshing enough to make up Hammersmith's mind. He picked up the phone and asked for the Colt file. Nudger could barely make out what he was saying around the fat cigar, but apparently

everyone at the Third was used to Hammersmith and could interpret cigarese.

The file didn't reveal much that Nudger didn't know. Fifteen minutes after the liquor store shooting, officers from a two-man patrol car, acting on the broadcast description of the gunman, approached Curtis Colt inside a service station where he was buying a pack of cigarettes from a vending machine. A car that had been parked near the end of the dimly lighted lot had sped away as they'd entered the station office. The officers had gotten only a glimpse of a dark green old Ford; they hadn't made out the license plate number but thought it might start with the letter "L."

Colt had surrendered without a struggle, and that night at the Third District station the four eyewitnesses had picked him out of a lineup. Their description of the getaway car matched that of the car the police had seen speeding from the service station. The loot from the holdup, and several gas station holdups committed earlier that night, wasn't on Colt, but probably it was in the car.

"Colt's innocence just jumps out of the file at you, doesn't it, Nudge?" Hammersmith said. He was grinning a fat grin around the fat cigar.

"What about the murder weapon?"

"Colt was unarmed when we picked him up."

"Seems odd."

"Not really," Hammersmith said. "He was planning to pay for the cigarettes. And maybe the gun was still too hot to touch so he left it in the car. Maybe it's still hot; it got a lot of use for one night."

Closing the file folder and laying it on a corner of Hammersmith's desk, Nudger stood up. "Thanks, Jack. I'll keep you tapped in if I learn anything interesting."

"Don't bother keeping me informed on this one, Nudge. It's over. I don't see how even a fiancée can doubt Colt's guilt."

Nudger shrugged, trying not to breathe too deeply in the smoke-hazed office. "Maybe it's an emotional thing. She thinks that because thought waves are tiny electrical impulses, Colt might experience time warp and all sorts of grotesque thoughts when all that voltage shoots through him. She has bad dreams."

"I'll bet she does," Hammersmith said. "I'll bet Colt has bad dreams, too. Only he deserves his. And maybe she's right."

"About what?"

"About all that voltage distorting thought and time. Who's to say?"

"Not Curtis Colt," Nudger said. "Not after they throw the switch."

"It's a nice theory, though," Hammersmith said. "I'll remember it. It might be a comforting thing to tell the murder victim's family."

"Sometimes," Nudger said, "you think just like a cop who's seen too much."

"Any of it's too much, Nudge," Hammersmith said with surprising sadness. He let more greenish smoke drift from his nostrils and the corners of his mouth; he looked like a stone Buddha seated behind the desk, one in which incense burned.

Nudger coughed and said goodbye.

"Only two eyewitnesses are needed to convict," Nudger said to Holly Ann the next day in her trailer, "and in this case there are four. None of them is at all in doubt about their identification of Curtis Colt as the killer. I have to be honest; it's time you should face the fact that Colt is guilty and that you're wasting your money on my services."

"All them witnesses know what's going to happen to Curtis," Holly Ann said. "They'd never want to live with the notion they might have made a mistake, killed an innocent man, so they've got themselves convinced that they're positive it was Curtis they saw that night."

"Your observation on human psychology is sound," Nudger said, "but I don't think it will help us. The witnesses were just as certain three months ago at the trial. I took the time to read the court transcript; the jury had no choice but to find Colt guilty, and the evidence hasn't changed."

Holly Ann drew her legs up and clasped her knees to her chest with both arms. Her little-girl posture matched her little-girl faith in her lover's innocence. She believed the white knight must arrive at any moment and snatch Curtis Colt from the electrical jaws of death. She believed hard. Nudger could almost hear his armor clank when he walked.

She wanted him to believe just as hard. "I see you need to be convinced of Curtis's innocence," she said wistfully. There was no doubt he'd forced her into some kind of corner. "If you come here tonight at eight, Mr. Nudger, I'll convince you."

"How?"

"I can't say. You'll understand why tonight."

"Why do we have to wait till tonight?"

"Oh, you'll see."

Nudger looked at the waif-like creature curled in the corner of the sofa. He felt as if they were playing a childhood guessing game while Curtis Colt waited his turn in the electric

chair. Nudger had never seen an execution; he'd heard it took longer than most people thought for the condemned to die. His stomach actually twitched.

"Can't we do this now with twenty questions?" he asked.

Holly Ann shook her head. "No, Mr. Nudger."

Nudger sighed and stood up, feeling as if he were about to bump his head on the trailer's low ceiling even though he was barely six feet tall.

"Make sure you're on time tonight, Mr. Nudger," Holly Ann said as he went out the door. "It's important."

At eight on the nose that evening Nudger was sitting at the tiny table in Holly Ann's kitchenette. Across from him was a thin, nervous man in his late twenties or early thirties, dressed in a longsleeved shirt despite the heat, and wearing sunglasses with silver mirror lenses. Holly Ann introduced the man as "Len, but that's not his real name," and said he was Curtis Colt's accomplice and the driver of their getaway car on the night of the murder.

"But me and Curtis was nowhere near the liquor store when them folks got shot," Len said vehemently.

Nudger assumed the sunglasses were so he couldn't effectively identify Len if it came

to a showdown in court. Len had lank, dark brown hair that fell to below his shoulders, and when he moved his arm Nudger caught sight of something blue and red on his briefly exposed wrist. A tattoo. Which explained the longsleeved shirt.

"You can understand why Len couldn't come forth and testify for Curtis in court," Holly Ann said.

Nudger said he could understand that. Len would have had to incriminate himself.

"We was way on the other side of town," Len said, "casing another service station, when that liquor store killing went down. Heck, we never held up nothing but service stations. They was our specialty."

Which was true, Nudger had to admit. Colt had done time for armed robbery six years ago after sticking up half a dozen service stations within a week. And all the other holdups he'd been tied to this time around were of service stations. The liquor store was definitely a departure in his M.O., one not noted in court during Curtis Colt's rush to judgment.

"Your hair is in your favor," Nudger said to Len.

"Huh?"

"Your hair didn't grow that long in the three months since the liquor store killing. The witnesses described the geta-way car driver as having

shorter, curlier hair, like Colt's, and a mustache."

Len shrugged. "I'll be honest with you—it don't help at all. Me and Curtis was kinda the same type. So to confuse any witnesses, in case we got caught, we made each other look even more alike. I'd tuck up my long hair and wear a wig that looked like Curtis's hair. My mustache was real, like Curtis's. I shaved it off a month ago. We did look alike at a glance; sorta like brothers."

Nudger bought that explanation; it wasn't uncommon for a team of holdup men to play tricks to confuse witnesses and the police. Too many lawyers had gotten in the game; the robbers, like the cops, were taking the advice of their attorneys and thinking about a potential trial even before the crime was committed.

"Is there any way, then, to prove you were across town at the time of the murder?" Nudger asked, looking at the two small Nudgers staring back at him from the mirror lenses.

"There's just my word," Len said, rather haughtily.

Nudger didn't bother telling him what that was worth. Why antagonize him?

"I just want you to believe Curtis is innocent," Len said with desperation. "Because he is! And so am I!"

And Nudger understood why

Len was here, taking the risk. If Colt was guilty of murder, Len was guilty of being an accessory to the crime. Once Curtis Colt had ridden the lightning, Len would have hanging over him the possibility of an almost certain life sentence, and perhaps even his own ride on the lightning, if he were ever caught. It wasn't necessary to actually squeeze the trigger to be convicted of murder.

"I need for you to try extra hard to prove Curtis is innocent," Len said. His thin lips quivered; he was near tears.

"Are you giving Holly Ann the money to pay me?" Nudger asked.

"Some of it, yeah. From what Curtis and me stole. And I gave Curtis's share to Holly Ann, too. Me and her are fifty-fifty on this."

Dirty money, Nudger thought. Dirty job. Still, if Curtis Colt happened to be innocent, trying against the clock to prove it was a job that needed to be done.

"Okay. I'll stay on the case."

"Thanks," Len said. His narrow hand moved impulsively across the table and squeezed Nudger's arm in gratitude. Len had the look of an addict; Nudger wondered if the longsleeved shirt was to hide needle tracks as well as the tattoo.

Len stood up. "Stay here with Holly Ann for ten minutes while I make myself scarce. I gotta

know I wasn't followed. You understand it ain't that I don't trust you; a man in my position has gotta be sure, is all."

"I understand. Go."

Len gave a spooked smile and went out the door. Nudger heard his running footfalls on the gravel outside the trailer. Nudger was forty-three years old and ten pounds overweight; lean and speedy Len needed a ten minute head start like Sinatra needed singing lessons.

"Is Len a user?" Nudger asked Holly Ann.

"Sometimes. But my Curtis never touched no dope."

"You know I have to tell the police about this conversation, don't you?"

Holly Ann nodded. "That's why we arranged it this way. They won't be any closer to Len than before."

"They might want to talk to you, Holly Ann."

She shrugged. "It don't matter. I don't know where Len is, nor even his real name nor how to get in touch with him. He'll find out all he needs to know about Curtis by reading the papers."

"You have a deceptively devious mind," Nudger told her, "considering that you look like Barbie Doll's country kid cousin."

Holly Ann smiled, surprised and pleased. "Do you find me attractive, Mr. Nudger?"

"Yes. And painfully young."

For just a moment Nudger almost thought of Curtis Colt as a lucky man. Then he looked at his watch, saw that his ten minutes were about up, and said goodbye. If Barbie had a kid cousin, Ken probably had one somewhere, too. And time was something you couldn't deny. Ask Curtis Colt.

"It doesn't wash with me," Hammersmith said from behind his desk, puffing angrily on his cigar. Angrily because it did wash a little bit; he didn't like the possibility, however remote, of sending an innocent man to his death. That was every good homicide cop's nightmare. "This Len character is just trying to keep himself in the clear on a murder charge."

"You could read it that way," Nudger admitted.

"It would help if you gave us a better description of Len," Hammersmith said gruffly, as if Nudger were to blame for Curtis Colt's accomplice still walking around free.

"I gave you what I could," Nudger said. "Len didn't give me much to pass on. He's street-wise and scared and knows what's at stake."

Hammersmith nodded, his fit of pique past. But the glint of weary frustration remained in his eyes.

"Are you going to question Holly Ann?" Nudger said.

"Sure, but it won't do any good. She's probably telling the truth. Len would figure we'd talk to her; he wouldn't tell her how to find him."

"You could stake out her trailer."

"Do you think Holly Ann and Len might be lovers?"

"No."

Hammersmith shook his head. "Then they'll probably never see each other again. Watching her trailer would be a waste of manpower."

Nudger knew Hammersmith was right. He stood up to go.

"What are you going to do now?" Hammersmith asked.

"I'll talk to the witnesses again. I'll read the court transcript again. And I'd like to talk with Curtis Colt."

"They don't allow visitors on Death Row, Nudge, only temporary boarders."

"This case is an exception," Nudger said. "Will you try to arrange it?"

Hammersmith chewed thoughtfully on his cigar. Since he'd been the officer in charge of the murder investigation, he'd been the one who'd nailed Curtis Colt. That carried an obligation.

"I'll phone you soon," he said, "let you know."

Nudger thanked Hammersmith and walked down the

hall into the clear, breathable air of the booking area.

That day he managed to talk again to all four eyewitnesses. Two of them got mad at Nudger for badgering them. They all stuck to their stories. Nudger reported this to Holly Ann at the Right-Steer Steakhouse, where she worked as a waitress. Several customers that afternoon got tears with their baked potatoes.

Hammersmith phoned Nudger that evening.

"I managed to get permission for you to talk to Colt," he said, "but don't get excited. Colt won't talk to you. He won't talk to anyone, not even a clergyman. He'll change his mind about the clergyman, but not about you."

"Did you tell him I was working for Holly Ann?"

"I had that information conveyed to him. He wasn't impressed. He's one of the stoic ones on Death Row."

Nudger's stomach kicked up, growled something that sounded like a hopeless obscenity. If even Curtis Colt wouldn't cooperate, how could he be helped? Absently Nudger peeled back the aluminum foil on a roll of antacid tablets and slipped two chalky white disks into his mouth. Hammersmith knew about his nervous stomach and must have heard him chomping the tablets. "Take it easy, Nudge. This isn't your fault."

"Then why do I feel like it is?"

"Because you feel too much of everything. That's why you had to quit the department."

"We've got another day before the execution," Nudger said. "I'm going to go through it all again. I'm going to talk to each of those witnesses even if they try to run when they see me coming. Maybe somebody will say something that will let in some light."

"There's no light out there, Nudge. You're wasting your time. Give up on this one and move on."

"Not yet," Nudger said. "There's something elusive here that I can't quite grab."

"And never will," Hammersmith said. "Forget it, Nudge. Live your life and let Curtis Colt lose his."

Hammersmith was right. Nothing Nudger did helped Curtis Colt in the slightest. At eight o'clock Saturday morning, while Nudger was preparing breakfast in his apartment, Colt was put to death in the electric chair. He'd offered no last words before two thousand volts had turned him from something into nothing.

Nudger heard the news of Colt's death on his kitchen radio. He went ahead and ate his eggs, but he skipped the toast.

That afternoon he consoled a

numbed and frequently sobbing Holly Ann and apologized for being powerless to stop her true love's execution. She was polite, trying to be brave. She preferred to suffer alone. Her boss at the Right-Steer gave her the rest of the day off, and Nudger drove her home.

Nudger slept a total of four hours during the next two nights. On Monday, he felt compelled to attend Curtis Colt's funeral. There were about a dozen people clustered around the grave, including the state-appointed clergyman and pallbearers. Nudger stood off to one side during the brief service. Holly Ann, looking like a child playing dress-up in black, stood well off to the other side. They didn't exchange words, only glances.

As the coffin was lowered into the earth, Nudger watched Holly Ann walk to where a taxi was waiting by a weathered stone angel. The cab wound its way slowly along the snaking narrow cemetery road to tall iron gates and the busy street. Holly Ann never looked back.

That night Nudger realized what was bothering him, and for the first time since Curtis Colt's death, he slept well.

In the morning he began watching Holly Ann's trailer.

At seven-thirty she

emerged, dressed in her yellow waitress uniform, and got into another taxi. Nudger followed in his battered Volkswagen Beetle as the cab drove her the four miles to her job at the Right-Steer Steakhouse. She didn't look around as she paid the driver and walked inside through the molded plastic Old-West-saloon swinging doors.

At six that evening another cab drove her home, making a brief stop at a grocery store.

It went that way for the rest of the week, trailer to work to trailer. Holly Ann had no visitors other than the plain brown paper bag she took home every night.

The temperature got up to around ninety-five and the humidity rose right along with it. It was one of St. Louis's legendary summer heat waves. Sitting melting in the Volkswagen, Nudger wondered if what he was doing was really worthwhile. Curtis Colt was, after all, dead, and had never been his client. Still, there were responsibilities that went beyond the job. Or perhaps they were actually the essence of the job.

The next Monday, after Holly Ann had left for work, Nudger used his Visa card to slip the flimsy lock on her trailer door, and let himself in.

It took him over an hour to find what he was searching for.

It had been well hidden, in a

cardboard box inside the access panel to the bathroom plumbing. After looking at the box's contents—almost seven hundred dollars in loot from Curtis Colt's brief life of crime, and another object Nudger wasn't surprised to see—Nudger resealed the box and replaced the access panel.

He continued to watch and follow Holly Ann, more confident now.

Two weeks after the funeral, when she left work one evening, she didn't go home.

Instead her taxi turned the opposite way and drove east on Watson Road. Nudger followed the cab along a series of side streets in South St. Louis, then part way down a dead-end alley to a large garage, above the door of which was lettered "Clifford's Auto Body."

Nudger backed out quickly onto the street, then parked the Volkswagen near the mouth of the alley. A few minutes later the cab drove by without a passenger. Within ten minutes, Holly Ann drove past in a shiny red Ford. Its license plate number began with an L.

When Nudger reached Placid Cove Trailer Park, he saw the Ford nosed in next to Holly Ann's trailer.

On the way to the trailer door, he paused and scratched the Ford's hood with a key. Even in the lowering evening

light he could see that beneath the new red paint the car's color was dark green.

Holly Ann answered the door right away when he knocked. She tried a smile when she saw it was him, but she couldn't quite manage her facial muscles, as if they'd become rigid and uncoordinated. She appeared ten years older. The little-girl look had deserted her; now she was an emaciated, grief-eroded woman, a country Barbie doll whose features some evil child had lined with dark crayon. The shaded crescents beneath her eyes completely took away their innocence. She was holding a glass that had once been a jelly jar. In it were two fingers of a clear liquid. Behind her on the table was a crumpled brown paper bag and a half-empty bottle of gin.

"I figured it out," Nudger told her.

Now she did smile, but it was fleeting, a sickly bluish shadow crossing her taut features. "You're like a dog with a rag, Mr. Nudger. You surely don't know when to let go." She stepped back and he followed her into the trailer. It was warm in there; something was wrong with the air conditioner. "Hot as hell, ain't it," Holly Ann commented. Nudger thought that was apropos.

He sat down across from her at the tiny Formica table, just

as he and Len had sat facing each other two weeks ago. She offered him a drink. He declined. She downed the contents of the jelly jar glass and poured herself another, clumsily striking the neck of the bottle on the glass. It made a sharp, flinty sound, as if sparks might fly.

"Now, what's this you've got figured out, Mr. Nudger?" She didn't want to, but she had to hear it. Had to share it.

"It's almost four miles to the Right-Steer Steakhouse," Nudger told her. "The waitresses there make little more than minimum wage, so cab fare to and from work has to eat a big hole in your salary. But then you seem to go everywhere by cab."

"My car's been in the shop."

"I figured it might be, after I found the money and the wig."

She bowed her head slightly and took a sip of gin. "Wig?"

"In the cardboard box inside the bathroom wall."

"You been snooping, Mr. Nudger." There was more resignation than outrage in her voice.

"You're sort of skinny, but not a short girl," Nudger went on. "With a dark curly wig and a fake mustache, sitting in a car, you'd resemble Curtis Colt enough to fool a dozen eyewitnesses who just caught a glimpse of you. It was a smart precau-

tion for the two of you to take."

Holly Ann looked astounded. "Are you saying I was driving the getaway car at the liquor store holdup?"

"Maybe. Then maybe you hired someone to play Len and convince me he was Colt's accomplice and that they were far away from the murder scene when the trigger was pulled. After I found the wig, I talked to some of your neighbors, who told me that until recently you'd driven a green Ford sedan."

Holly Ann ran her tongue along the edges of her protruding teeth.

"So Curtis and Len used my car for their holdups."

"I doubt if Len ever met Curtis. He's somebody you paid in stolen money or drugs to sit there where you're sitting now and lie to me."

"If I was driving that getaway car, Mr. Nudger, and *knew* Curtis was guilty, why would I have hired a private investigator to try to find a hole in the eyewitnesses' stories?"

"That's what bothered me at first," Nudger said, "until I realized you weren't interested in clearing Curtis. What you were really worried about was Curtis Colt talking in prison. You didn't want those witnesses' stories changed, you wanted them verified. And you wanted the police to learn about not-his-right-name Len."

Holly Ann raised her head to look directly at him with eyes that begged and dreaded. She asked simply, "Why would I want that?"

"Because you were Curtis Colt's accomplice in all of his robberies. And when you hit the liquor store, he stayed in the car to drive. You fired the shot that killed the old woman. He was the one who fired the wild shot from the speeding car. Colt kept quiet about it because he loved you. He never talked, not to the police, not to his lawyer, not even to a priest. Now that he's dead you can trust him forever, but I have a feeling you could have anyway. He loved you more than you loved him, and you'll have to live knowing he didn't deserve to die."

She looked down into her glass as if for answers and didn't say anything for a long time. Nudger felt a bead of perspiration trickle crazily down the back of his neck. Then she said, "I didn't want to shoot that old man, but he didn't leave me no choice. Then the old woman came at me." She looked up at Nudger and smiled ever so slightly. It was a smile Nudger hadn't seen on her before; one he didn't like. "God help me, Mr. Nudger, I can't quit think-

ing about shooting that old woman."

"You murdered her," Nudger said, "and you murdered Curtis Colt by keeping silent and letting him die for you."

"You can't prove nothing," Holly Ann said, still with her ancient-eyed, eerie smile that had nothing to do with amusement.

"You're right," Nudger told her, "I can't. But I don't think legally proving it is necessary, Holly Ann. You said it: thoughts are actually tiny electrical impulses in the brain. Curtis Colt rode the lightning all at once. With you, it will take years, but the destination is the same. I think you'll come to agree that his way was easier."

She sat very still. She didn't answer. Wasn't going to.

Nudger stood up and wiped his damp forehead with the back of his hand. He felt sticky, dirty, confined by the low ceiling and near walls of the tiny, stifling trailer. He had to get out of there to escape the sensation of being trapped.

He didn't say goodbye to Holly Ann when he walked out. She didn't say goodbye to him. The last sound Nudger heard as he left the trailer was the clink of the bottle on the glass.

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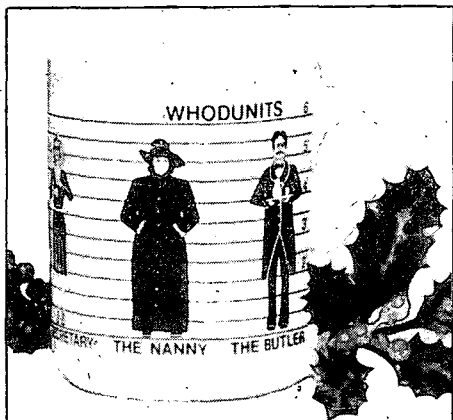
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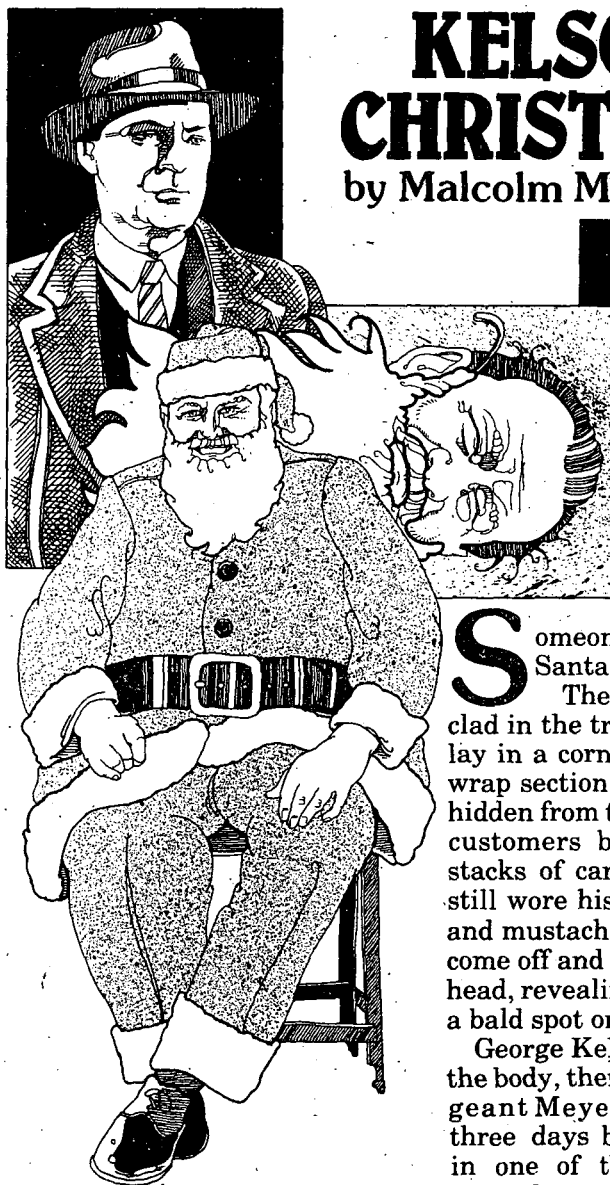
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KELSO'S CHRISTMAS

by Malcolm McClintick



THOMPSON/84

Someone had murdered a Santa Claus.

The body, rotund and clad in the traditional red suit, lay in a corner behind the gift wrap section, in the basement, hidden from the view of passing customers by a counter and stacks of cardboard boxes. He still wore his long white beard and mustache, but the hat had come off and lay a foot from his head, revealing black hair with a bald spot on top.

George Kelso looked down at the body, then at Detective Sergeant Meyer. It was ten A.M., three days before Christmas, in one of the larger downtown department stores.

Illustration by George Thompson

"Okay," Meyer said, "let's get this area cleared so the lab boys can get to work." He sounded tired. Kelso understood that it wasn't fatigue, but depression. Every year at Christmas Meyer, a small dark Jewish man, became depressed and usually withdrawn. It was no good talking to him about it, it was something Meyer had to live with and work out for himself, at least until he became willing to confide in his associates at the police department.

"I was supposed to go shopping this afternoon with Susan," Kelso said to nobody in particular. "I suppose that's out of the question now."

"I suppose it is," Meyer replied. "All right, Kelso, why don't you take the offices upstairs and I'll check with the clerks. The other guys are talking to customers to see if anybody noticed anything unusual."

"I'll go talk to the business staff," Kelso agreed. When Meyer was in his Christmas funk, it was best to agree with whatever he said. The store's music system was playing "Winter Wonderland" over the noise and confusion of shoppers, and a few feet away, a little boy was screaming and trying to kick his mother, who looked flustered.

Kelso headed for the elevators.

Kelso himself became somewhat depressed at Christmas, but not for the same reasons as Meyer. For one thing, he found himself constantly thrown in with relatives at this time of year, and none of them especially liked him. Being unable to understand what had possessed him to seek a career as a police detective, they tended to regard him with suspicion and hostility. One of his more enlightened uncles had once referred to Kelso behind his back (but within easy hearing distance) as "that fascist," and a younger niece had often called him a pig. He had been forbidden to bring his gun to the various family dinners, though it was the last thing he would have brought, and whenever he entered a room everyone stopped talking and stared as if, he thought, expecting him to make an arrest.

For another, Christmas jarred his nerves. He had been brought up in a deeply religious family and the season had been the highlight of his year. It had seemed magical, with its aura of good cheer, its feeling of universal peace. Then he'd grown into adulthood to find all of that shattered by the reality of global conflict, mass murders, tough cynicism, and his own rapidly fading belief in anything mag-

ical. Ultimately, he'd come to view Christmas as an elaborate hoax perpetrated on a gullible public by department store managers, advertising executives, and toy manufacturers.

And now someone had killed Santa Claus.

But the dead man wasn't really Santa Claus. Kelso rode up to the eighth floor executive offices, going over the victim's particulars in his mind. Arnold Wundt, fifty-five, in charge of accounting, divorced, wife and kids on the west coast, quiet and bookish, nondrinker, non-smoker, rarely dated, few friends. Who would want to kill such a man? Someone had wanted to.

Someone, at about nine thirty that morning, according to the coroner's man, had cornered Arnold Wundt behind the gift wrapping counter and shoved a long thin knife directly into his plump body, angling it upward from just below his ribs and penetrating his heart, killing him almost instantly. That someone had left the knife in the bloodstained corpse and was now back at work, or shopping for presents, or on a plane bound for the Bahamas. It was anybody's guess.

"May I help you, sir?"

Kelso had entered the manager's outer office and stood looking down at a receptionist's

desk, suddenly realizing where he was, as if he'd awakened abruptly from a dream. He found his unlit pipe in one hand, his overcoat in the other.

"Sergeant Kelso," he said.

"Police department. I wonder if I could talk to Mr. Anderson?"

"Oh, is it about the murder?"

The girl was under twenty-five, blonde, cheerful, blue-eyed, slightly plump. She was the kind of healthy, well-fed girl who'd have been a cheerleader at some midwestern university. Ohio State, Kelso thought. Or Purdue.

"Yes, ma'am," he said, noticing a gold band on her ring finger.

A big, healthy smile. "Just a minute, sergeant." She got up and went through a door behind her desk, returned almost immediately with another smile. "Go right in. Mr. Anderson's out right now, but his assistant, Mr. Briggs, will help you."

"Thanks."

Mr. Briggs was short, probably five seven or so, heavy, with oversized glasses that greatly magnified his round, staring eyes, making him look like some sort of surprised bug. His wide lips were fixed in a permanent smile. A surprised, happy bug. He held a large sandwich, trying to stuff oversized bites of it into his wide mouth. There were reddish

stains on the sleeves of his white shirt, and a piece of lettuce on his pants leg.

"Stupid cafeteria," he said around a mouthful, and dabbed with a napkin at his sleeve. "They always get too much ketchup on these things. I must've told them a hundred times." He swallowed, finally, and glared. "Can't finish it. Too messy." He wrapped the remains in a paper napkin and dropped it into a wastebasket, then held out a small pale hand. "Glad to meet you, Sergeant Kelsy."

"Kelso," he corrected, and sighed.

"Right. Kelso. Glad to meet you. Been shopping, sergeant? We've got some terrific deals on suits." The bug cast a critical eye at Kelso's battered corduroy suit. "Fix you right up. No? Well, I guess it's business, isn't it? Terrible about poor Wundt."

"I'd like to ask you a few questions, Mr. Briggs." Kelso took out his notebook and ballpoint, putting away his pipe and dropping his overcoat onto a chair. "Could you tell me—"

"Listen, sergeant." The bug's manner became suddenly confidential. He hurried across the office to the door, seemed to make certain it was tightly closed, and scurried back behind the polished desk. "I'd better tell you something. I don't

know how much it's got to do with poor Wundt, but you'd better know about it. Sergeant—" Briggs glanced left and right in a comic imitation of some movie character about to reveal The Big Secret "—someone in this store's been embezzling money."

The words alone were normal enough; Kelso had encountered numerous embezzlers. It was the exaggerated way in which Briggs had spoken the words—his pop-eyed stare, his stage whisper, his air of a little kid confiding something about men from Mars to his best friend.

"Embezzling?" Kelso scribbled in his notebook. Fortunately Briggs couldn't see it, because Kelso had written: "Comic book character."

"Embezzling, sergeant. Somebody's been skimming money right off the top. It amounts to over a hundred thousand to date. And not only that, I think I know who it was."

Kelso allowed a theatrical pause before asking, "Who?"

Briggs leaned closer, looking immensely satisfied with himself, and whispered loudly: "Arnold Wundt."

"Wundt?" Kelso frowned, not even pretending surprise.

"Right. Listen, sergeant. Wundt was an accountant, and a good one. He was, in fact, in charge of accounting. But as

the assistant manager, and I've got a degree in accounting myself—" he cleared his throat loudly—"I'm not only qualified but also duty-bound to check Wundt's work. And I caught him at it, sergeant. Now, if you ask me, someone else caught him at it, too. Someone who maybe tried to blackmail him and then, when he couldn't bleed him any more, got rid of him."

Kelso nodded slowly, as if considering what Briggs had said.

The little bug was a waste of time. It was too hot in the office and he was hungry for lunch.

"You don't happen to know where Mr. Anderson is, do you?" he asked, trying to sound polite.

"I think he was going to meet with Wundt about something," Briggs said, smiling his bug-smile. "I haven't seen him since about nine thirty, when he left to go downstairs. Come to think of it, he said he was on his way to gift wrap. Yes, I'm certain. Gift wrap. About nine thirty." Briggs seemed to emphasize the last words, and gave Kelso a meaningful look.

Suddenly Kelso realized what Briggs reminded him of. Not a bug at all, but a toy he'd gotten one year for Christmas, a rubber or plastic likeness of Froggy the Gremlin, pop eyes, leering smile. Briggs was Froggy the

Gremlin with oversized glasses. And probably about as bright.

"I appreciate your help," Kelso told him, trying not to sound sarcastic. "Well, have a nice day."

"Merry Christmas, sergeant," said Froggy. "A *very* merry Christmas."

Kelso winced and left the office. The blonde cheerleader beamed at him and said, "Merry Christmas, sergeant."

"Same to you," he replied, as though returning an insult, and hurried for the elevators.

"I wasn't able to find out a damn thing," Detective Sergeant Meyer said. "As far as anybody knows, Wundt reported to his office in accounting this morning at nine sharp, as usual. He works alone. Nobody saw him or noticed him again till the gift wrap girl found his body behind her counter at a quarter to ten, when she was coming back from the ladies' room." The small detective shrugged. "That's it. Nobody saw anything, nobody knows anything. Everybody liked Wundt, but not very well. Nobody disliked him. He was a nothing, a zero."

"He was a Santa Claus," said Kelso.

They sat in the store's cafeteria, the noon crowd chattering and munching around them.

Meyer glared at his meatloaf and said:

"Yeah, he was a Santa Claus. Why can't people make meatloaf any more? My grandmother used to make delicious meatloaf. This stuff is still red in the center. Don't they cook it?"

"I thought you only ate kosher."

"Nuts. I eat anything. Jewish food happens to taste better, but that doesn't mean I can't eat what I want. I'm enlightened."

"Ah." Kelso nodded. "I wonder if Arnold Wundt's playing Santa had anything to do with his murder."

"He was scheduled to fill in for the regular Santa this morning," Meyer said. "The store's been having Santa in a booth for the kids every morning at ten and every afternoon at two and five, each shopping day till Christmas. What a zoo. I'm glad I don't have kids. All my friends with kids are raising schizophrenics. All of them have split personalities—half Jewish, half Christian. I tell you, it's hell having a kid in this country if you're a Jew at Christmas."

"Schizophrenic doesn't mean split personality," Kelso pointed out. "I've taken some psych courses. It means—"

"Forget what it means."

Meyer stabbed at his meatloaf.

Over the hubbub drifted the faint sounds of "Sleigh Ride." At a nearby table two little girls sang "Jingle Bells," egged on by their overweight mother, who seemed to think her mission was to entertain the other shoppers with her offspring and their whining voices.

"Who was supposed to have been Santa this morning?" Kelso asked.

"Huh? Oh, you mean whose place did Wundt take?" Meyer thought for a moment. "The assistant manager. Guy named Briggs."

"Froggy the Gremlin," Kelso murmured.

"What?"

"Nothing. So Briggs was supposed to have been Santa Claus."

"I'm taking this meatloaf back. It's inedible. You'd think with all their peace on earth and good will they could cook a piece of meatloaf enough to make it edible." Meyer got up and carried his plate through the milling crowd to the food line, and returned a few minutes later with the same plate, scowling.

"What happened?" Kelso asked.

"They told me to eat it," he said. "They told me I ordered meatloaf and I got meatloaf. They told me Merry Christmas."

"Greetings of the season," Kelso told him.

Meyer muttered something under his breath. The two little girls sang "Deck the Halls" at the top of their lungs.

Meyer became convinced that the murderer was the gift wrap girl, a tall brunette named Claudia Collins. She stood several inches taller than Meyer, something which, Kelso knew, infuriated him; she was sullen, even while wrapping customers' gifts, which infuriated everybody; and she was the only employee who would admit to having been in or near the gift wrap area at or about the time of the murder, nine thirty that morning.

"I'm going to question her some more," Meyer announced as he and Kelso left the cafeteria. "I'm not letting some dumb broad spoil my holiday. If she stabbed that accountant, I'll get it out of her."

"By the way," Kelso said, resisting the urge to light his pipe. "When I talked to Briggs this morning, he accused Arnold Wundt of embezzling over a hundred thousand dollars from the store."

Meyer shot him a dark look. "You're kidding. How would Briggs know that?"

"He says he's got an account-

ing degree, and checked Wundt's work."

"Huh." Meyer's wheels turned. They stopped turning. "Claudia Collins probably found out about Wundt's embezzling. She probably tried to extort some money from him. He pulled a knife on her, and she managed to stab him with it. Well, I'm going to find her. You check around the store. Keep your eyes and ears open, and let me know if you hear anything else."

"Have a good time," Kelso said.

Meyer nodded solemnly, as though it had been a serious wish. "I will."

They parted. Kelso watched the detective shove his way into the crowd until it engulfed him; then someone grabbed his arm.

"George!"

He turned. Susan Overstreet's wide brown eyes smiled at him. She was running one hand through wavy blonde hair and using the other to hold a shopping bag crammed with packages.

"Hi."

"Isn't this hectic? I've already got five of the things on my list. Listen, go with me to the children's department, up on three, so we can find something for Peggy and Timmy. Then—"

"Hold on a minute, Susan. I can't —"

"Did you find that aftershave

for your uncle? There's a sale in men's stuff. By the way, tonight we've got the eggnog party at my Aunt Eleanor's house, and she says—"

"Susan!"

"Huh? What is it?"

"I can't go shopping with you. Haven't you heard about the murder?"

"Murder! What murder?"

"One of the employees, the head of accounting. They found him this morning, stabbed, in a Santa Claus suit. I'm on duty till further notice."

"But you had the afternoon off."

"I know. But now I don't."

"Well, darn."

A tall gray-haired man in an expensive suit and tie stepped out of the crowd. "Sergeant Kelso?"

"Yes, sir?"

"I'm James Anderson, the store manager." He offered a firm hand. "Sorry I missed you this morning."

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Anderson." He glanced at Susan. "This woman's been following me around the store, but I don't think she's done anything illegal. Did you pay for those items, miss?"

Susan smiled sweetly. "This man seems to think he's a policeman, Mr. Anderson, but I've seen him following other women around the store. I think he

may be dangerous. Excuse me."

Kelso smiled blandly at the manager's quizzical look. "Just a little joke, Mr. Anderson. Uh, could we talk in your office?"

"Certainly."

They took the elevator up to eight, passed the cheerleader, and entered the office where Kelso had interviewed Briggs. Anderson sat down behind the polished desk and folded his hands. "Have you come up with anything, sergeant?" He looked grave.

Kelso started to answer, then hesitated. The office door was slightly ajar. By moving a little to his left he could just see the toes of someone's shoes.

"We haven't come up with anything officially," he said.

Anderson looked interested. "But, unofficially?"

"Unofficially, Mr. Anderson, I believe we know who murdered Arnold Wundt." Kelso took out his pipe and some matches. There was an ashtray on the manager's desk. "At least, I believe I know who murdered him. He was to have played Santa Claus this morning, right?"

"No, I believe that would have been Mr. Briggs."

"But apparently Wundt took his place for some reason."

"Oh. Right. I remember now. Briggs had a meeting to attend. But who was it, sergeant? Who

killed Wundt, and why?"

Kelso got his pipe going and puffed at it a couple of times. "I've sent some of my men over to Headquarters to get an accountant for me. When they get back, the accountant will check some things, and then I'll make an arrest. I really don't want to name names till the accountant gets here."

"I see."

The door opened and Briggs stepped into the office, eyes popping behind his thick lenses. "Mr. Anderson—oh, excuse me, I didn't know you were with someone. Oh, hello; Sergeant Kelso."

Kelso nodded. His pipe went out.

"What is it, Briggs?"

"It's about Santa Claus this afternoon, Mr. Anderson. The customers are really upset about missing him this morning, and it's one thirty now. They're already lining up for the two P.M. Santa."

"Can't you do it, Briggs?" Anderson's tone was sharp.

"No, sir. I'm afraid not. That is, I'd very much like not to. It's occurred to me that it might be dangerous."

"What?"

"I mean, sir—suppose the killer knew I was to play Santa at ten this morning. Suppose the killer found Santa behind the gift wrap counter. Every-

body looks alike in that outfit, with the pillow and whiskers and all. The killer would have assumed it was me, and stabbed him. But by now he probably knows it was the wrong person."

"Is that possible, Sergeant Kelso? Could the murderer have been after Briggs here, instead of Wundt?"

"It's possible," Kelso said, trying hard to suppress laughter. He was imagining a cold-blooded killer stalking Froggy the Gremlin.

"Well, who are we going to get? We've got to have someone."

"I've played Santa at the police Christmas party a few times," Kelso said. "I could do it."

Anderson stared, then slowly nodded. Briggs smiled his face-breaking smile; his pop eyes dancing with delight behind his glasses.

"It's not exactly in the line of duty for a police officer," Anderson said. "But we could certainly use you."

"I'd be glad to help out. I tend to put on a few pounds over the holidays." Kelso patted his stomach. "I won't even need much of a pillow."

"Good." The manager stood up, all business. "Briggs, get Sergeant Kelso a Santa suit and show him the booth. Thank

you, sergeant. I won't forget this."

Kelso let himself be led away by the assistant manager. When they were out in the hall he said:

"Excuse me, is the Santa Claus outfit at the booth?"

Briggs nodded. "Yes, down on the main floor."

"I'll meet you there," Kelso said. "I've got to go to the men's room."

Briggs nodded, beaming, and Kelso hurried down the hall.

The killer stood in line, waiting for Santa. With his left hand he held the hand of a little boy whom he'd talked into standing in line with him, a third grader named Kevin whose mother worked in Credit and Layaway. The killer had paid Kevin five dollars and told him he wanted to talk to Santa but, as an adult, was embarrassed to go without a child. Kevin had taken the money and agreed to help.

In front of the killer and Kevin stood a fat woman whose two small girls had just finished singing "Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer" in strident voices and were starting "Silent Night," encouraged by their mother. Ahead of them an attractive black woman waited her turn, whispering to a frightened little boy. Just in-

side a white cardboard fence surrounding a cardboard sleigh and eight cardboard reindeer, a jolly Santa sat on a red chair, holding a small girl on his knee while the girl's mother, presumably, looked on. There was so much noise in the store, with all the talking and laughter and music and the whining of the fat lady's daughters, that the killer couldn't make out what was being said by the jolly Santa and the small girl, but it didn't matter to him.

The killer's other hand was inside his suitcoat pocket, gripping the handle of a small automatic pistol, fully loaded. He smiled as if thoroughly enjoying himself and nodded once in a while at little Kevin, who kept chattering something about a Star Wars toy. He wanted to tell little Kevin that he was an obnoxious brat, but he kept smiling and pretended to be having a good time.

The killer's name was Briggs.

For over a year he'd been embezzling money from the department store, but last week that fool, Arnold Wundt, had caught him at it. Wundt had threatened to go to the police unless Briggs replaced every cent he'd taken. He'd had to kill him, of course.

And now this detective, this Kelso, seemed to have gotten wise to him. An accountant was

coming. Kelso would manage to link the embezzlement to Wundt's murder. Briggs couldn't let that happen.

He hadn't planned to kill Wundt in the Santa suit; it had just happened that way. But now the cops, except Kelso, were looking for a Santa Claus connection. He'd kill Kelso in the Santa suit and add to the confusion.

His fingers tightened on the automatic as the attractive black woman stepped forward and boosted her little boy onto Santa's knee.

"Ho ho ho," said the jolly Santa in a strangely rasping voice, but Briggs wasn't fooled by the disguise.

Next in line were the two singing brats; then it would be the killer's turn.

Briggs watched little Kevin step up to the red-painted chair.

"Ho ho ho," rasped the voice.

He had to admit that the disguise was good—with the full white beard and drooping mustache, the red hat pulled low over the forehead, steel-rimmed spectacles on the nose, and the padding in the suit, the character bore little resemblance to Sergeant Kelso. But Briggs knew it was.

He stepped forward, drew the

automatic from his pocket, and held it close to his chest, aimed at the Santa suit. The gun was between his body and Santa's, invisible to the waiting shoppers.

"That's enough, Kevin," Briggs said, smiling. "Get down now, and let me have my turn."

Kevin nodded, slid down, and walked away.

The eyes behind the spectacles widened slightly.

"I don't want to shoot you," Briggs said, smiling. "But I will. Believe me, I will. Take a break now. I'll tell them Santa has to take a break." He jabbed with the gun.

Santa stood up. Briggs hid the gun and turned to face the crowd.

"Ladies and gentlemen, old Santa has to take a short break, but he'll be right back." He turned. "Get moving, Kelso. We're going to the basement. If you do what I say, maybe you've got a chance."

He would kill him in the basement. No one would hear the shot over this bedlam. They walked through the crowd.

"Keep walking," he said.

It was taking too long. He couldn't shoot Kelso here in the middle of the main floor. If they didn't get to the basement before something happened, he'd have to turn and run from the store. He felt confused. The

plan no longer seemed nearly as workable as when he'd first thought of it. Kelso is the only one who's sure, Briggs had thought. Get rid of Kelso and everything will be all right. But now it occurred to him that some of those women and children might remember him, remember that he'd gone off with Santa. He'd have to kill Kelso, if he could, and leave town immediately with what money he had. His chances were limited. He was sweating.

It was too late to turn back now. He'd made his move.

Briggs held one of Santa's arms, steering him around a corner and along a narrow corridor that led to a basement stairway, aiming the gun with his other hand. Briggs was short; for some reason Kelso seemed shorter than he had earlier. Just as his face went hot with the realization that something was wrong, a hand came from nowhere and gripped his wrist painfully, twisting it so that he dropped the pistol. Powerful hands grabbed him and shoved him hard against the wall of the corridor.

"You're under arrest," said George Kelso. Kelso stood in the middle of the hall in his corduroy suit, flanked by three uniformed cops with drawn revolvers. "The charges are embezzlement and murder."

Briggs stared. "Kelso! Then who the hell . . ."

The Santa person pulled the beard and mustache away and removed the hat. Briggs saw a smiling, attractive girl with blonde hair and brown eyes.

"Are you all right, Susan?" Kelso asked.

"Ho ho ho," said the girl.

Kelso, Meyer, and Susan Overstreet sat at a table in the store's cafeteria. "Silver Bells" played from the speakers, and shoppers at neighboring tables laughed and rustled their packages.

"Look at this meatloaf," said Meyer, poking at it with his fork. "Now they've practically burned it."

"Actually, mine's not too bad." Kelso took a bite. "I was starving."

"So how did you make the switch with Susan?" Meyer asked.

"I went to the men's room," Kelso said. "When I was sure nobody else was in there, I let Susan in and we put the Santa outfit on her."

"Incredible." Meyer shook his head. "You're lucky nobody walked in on you."

"I was leaning against the door."

"Sergeant Meyer?" Susan smiled at the detective. "Would

you like to come over to my aunt's house tonight for some eggnog? If you wouldn't be uncomfortable. I mean, we won't sing any carols or anything, and Aunt Eleanor doesn't have a tree this year, just a few lights in the window."

"Trees are too expensive for people on fixed incomes," Kelso said, trying not to sound angry.

"So, will you come? We'd like to have you."

Meyer put down his fork and cleared his throat. "Nobody's ever invited me to have eggnog before," he said quietly. "Tell your aunt I'd like to come." He stood up. "I can't eat this stuff. I'll leave you two alone." He started away, then added: "Take the rest of the afternoon off, Kelso."

"Gee, thanks." Kelso glanced at his watch. "All forty-three minutes, huh?"

"Well," Susan said, eyeing him closely, "are you going to tell me how you knew?"

"Knew what?"

"Don't do that. How you knew it was Briggs."

"Oh." He shrugged. "Briggs made a couple of mistakes. He tried to convince me that Anderson, the store manager, had gone down to gift wrap at nine thirty. He kept emphasizing nine thirty. But why? I was the first one to question him, and only the other cops knew about

the coroner's estimate of nine thirty as the time of the stabbing. But the murderer would have known. That was one thing."

"Hmm. What else?"

"He was too eager to tell me about the embezzlement, and to blame it on Arnold Wundt. If he'd been so certain, why hadn't he exposed Wundt himself, earlier? So I wondered if maybe Briggs was the embezzler, and not Wundt. Maybe Wundt had found him out, and Briggs had killed him to keep him quiet." Kelso shrugged. "Turns out I was right."

Susan blinked and folded her arms across her chest. "That's it? That's all? I put on a Santa suit and risked my life for nine thirty and some talk about an embezzlement?"

"Well, there was one other thing..."

"Tell me."

"Well, when I visited Briggs in Anderson's office, he was eating a sandwich of some kind. He kept dabbing at his shirt-sleeve and complaining about how the cafeteria always put too much ketchup on the bread. But after I left him in the hall, I went back to the office and found his sandwich in the trash. There wasn't any ketchup on it." Kelso paused. "That stuff on his sleeve was blood."

"Yuk."

"Incidentally, can't your aunt really afford a tree this year?"

"It'd be tough. She buys a lot of presents. You're coming tonight, aren't you? Do you think Meyer will come?"

"Sergeant Kelso—" A tall, well-dressed man hurried up to their table. It was Anderson, the store manager, looking breathless. "Finally found you."

"Don't tell me something else has happened," Kelso said.

"We're supposed to have another Santa session in fifteen minutes, sergeant. With Wundt dead and Briggs in custody, there's nobody to do it. So I was wondering . . ."

It wasn't fair, he thought. He was almost off duty. He was tired. He wanted to go home and relax. He needed a bath, and he was sick to death of the chatter of mothers and children, the tinny music, the announcements of sales in this or that department.

Susan had done it once. She'd looked cute in the padded red suit and whiskers. He turned a pleading glance in her direction, trying to look desperate. She smiled, but slowly shook her head no.

"What do you say, sergeant? Will you help out? Please?"

It wasn't fair. He sighed heavily in resignation. He nodded.

"Good man," said Anderson.

"That's the Christmas spirit," Susan said.

Kelso scowled.

Kelso met Meyer at the door. Outside it was snowing. "Come in. You're late."

"I could leave," said Meyer testily.

"Nonsense. Susan's aunt wants to meet you, and there's still plenty of eggnog. You're letting in the snow."

Meyer came in dragging a small, well-shaped tree and a paper bag.

"What's this?" Kelso asked suspiciously.

"Some sort of festive plant." Meyer frowned. "Silly lights and ornaments to hang on it. Somebody killed a tree so you people could celebrate."

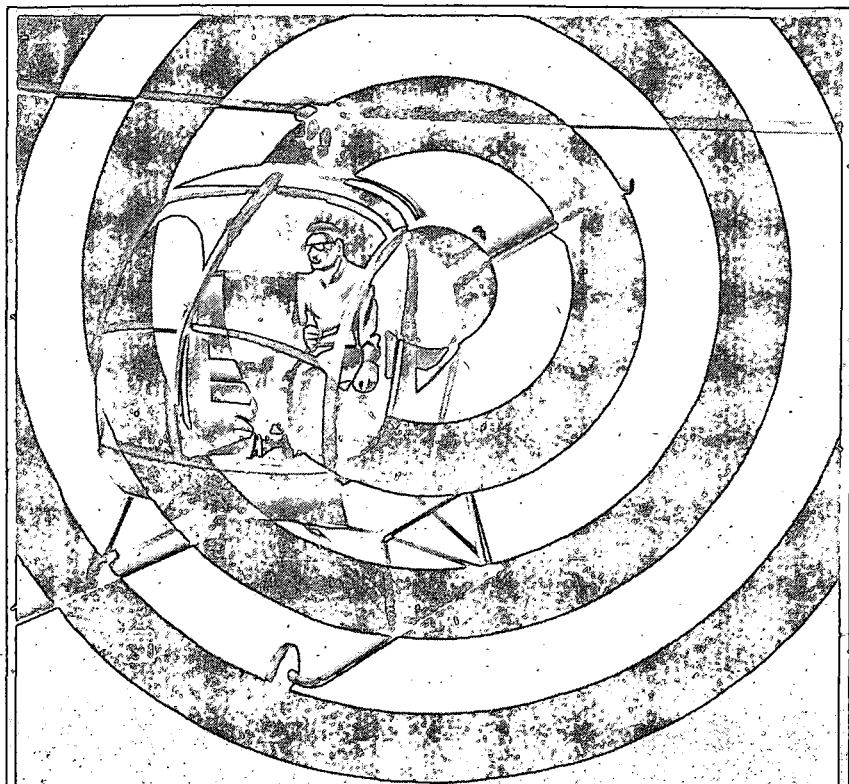
Kelso was moved. He stood for a moment, feeling a little of the old magic.

"Happy holidays, Meyer," he said.

Meyer nodded. "Merry Christmas, Kelso."

There was much cheer in the house that night.

FICTION



I Can Fly or I Can Run

by George Ingersoll

Illustration by John Jinks

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It was one more hot, muggy Saturday morning when the phone rang. "Mr. Pierce?"

I admitted it.

"Mr. Pierce, my name is Lieutenant Stein. I'm with the state police. We understand you're a helicopter expert. Is that correct?"

"Well, before I retired I spent about forty years as an aeronautical engineer, about thirty of them designing helicopters, so I know a bit about what makes them shake. You decide if that qualifies me. What's on your mind, lieutenant?"

"We're seeking expert advice in connection with a case involving a helicopter. The captain asked me to see if I could dig . . . uh . . . find an expert locally, before we flew somebody in, and, if so, offer him our standard consultant's fee for a day of his time."

"Is this about that old chopper that rolled over and burned the other day? I read about that."

"Yes . . . it seems there's more there than meets the eye."

"How in the world did you dig . . . uh . . . find me?" The boss and I lead a pretty quiet life since I retired.

"I inquired around at all the local airports and shops, and struck out. Nobody seemed to know much about helicopters except the people at the shop

where this thing happened. I mentioned my problem to Pete Starr, who's a neighbor of mine, and he told me about you."

That explained it. Pete sings baritone in the barbershop quartet in which I sing bass. If you need some entertainment for your next office party, look us up. The Gross National Product (that's us) also does weddings, bar mitzvahs, etc.

"If you're available," said the lieutenant, "I can pick you up in about half an hour and fill you in enroute."

"Okay . . . sounds good . . . Any excuse for not fixing a leaky gutter on a hot day is a good one. By the way, what does the 'standard consultant's fee' you mentioned come to?"

A brief silence, then, stiffly: "The state allows a hundred and fifty dollars per day or fraction thereof." I chuckled to myself, thinking of today's industry standards. For a hundred and fifty dollars they could buy an expert opinion on why a bearing with square rollers doesn't roll too good.

"Okay," I said, "you can send me the check and I'll endorse it back to the PBA, or whatever you state types call it. I'm in for the excitement. I've never been part of a police investigation before."

About half an hour later, a compact devoid of whitewalls or

any other obvious options pulled up out front. I told the boss to expect me back when she saw me, and went out to meet Lieutenant Stein. He turned out to be a tall, rangy man with graying temples, deliberate in movements and speech.

After mutual introductions we were rolling. "Ever fly anything, lieutenant?" I asked.

"Matter of fact, I used to fly the odd F4U on and off the odd carrier, from time to time. That's why the captain assigned me to this case. I tried to explain to him that helicopters are a squirrely sort of breed apart, and that thirty-year-old stick time in fixed wings didn't make me any better qualified for this case than anyone else, but he never got the message."

"Alas, Lieutenant Stein, the same arcane forces that brought you Pac-Man and seventy dollar home computers have made the helicopter a lot less squirrely than it was in the '50's, but you are basically correct. An airplane it ain't. Tell me about the case."

We were on our way to an airport about forty miles away—a typical rural setup, with Unicom, weekend light-plane pilots, and (recently) skydivers and ultralights. It has been chosen by an entrepreneur, a 'Nam type, as the site for a helicopter service and

overhaul facility: He'd acquired the land from the municipality that owned the airport, put up his shop and hangar, and (I was told) was doing fairly well. He'd been smart enough not to try to compete for the corporate helicopter overhaul business to our east and south but specialized in older choppers doing ag and survey work, with prices to match.

The incident (Lieutenant Stein's word) had occurred the previous Tuesday. A venerable old campaigner had emerged from the shop after a periodic overhaul. The shop's operator employed a pilot, and insisted that his people do a test flight prior to flyaway by the owners. The shop foreman (by edict) went along, which promoted quality workmanship. The old bird had been taken up, had done its thing, and had just touched down. This time the pilot was alone, the shop foreman having been excused to oversee the delivery of a third sibling for his other two.

The testimony of the observer was to the effect that, just after landing, the helicopter began to rock from side to side with increasing vigor. Soon the rotor blades struck the ground, the aircraft turned over on its side and began to burn. Both the airport and the operator had small crash trucks,

and both had responded promptly. There had been little fuel aboard (since the operator was paying), and the fire was not so severe as it might have been. The bird was totaled and the pilot was dead. The local authorities had been summoned.

"Their local people," said Stein, "don't go much beyond issuing traffic tickets. They squealed for State, and I got sent. We notified all the right people, and sent the pilot's body away. I've got the wreckage sealed off. Regional FAA sent an investigator, but all he did was walk around the wreck and talk to the people involved. He came up mumbling about 'ground resonance,' said a report would follow, and headed back for the Apple. He left me with the distinct impression that the report would mention 'pilot error.'"

Just then we arrived at the neat cement block building that was our destination, but the lieutenant made no move to disembark.

"Question one, Mr. Pierce, to earn your gigantic fee. Does what that FAA guy said make sense? I didn't understand it."

"Yes and no. That old cow could easily do exactly what you described as a result of what some people call 'ground resonance,' but it's unlikely in

the hands of an experienced pilot. He'd have been on guard, and headed it off before it developed."

"Glad to hear that, I guess," said Lieutenant Stein. "The M.E.'s report on the autopsy came back yesterday. The pilot didn't die from injuries in the rollover. He was killed by a shot entering the head from directly behind and slightly above the horizontal. When I called the FAA man, he said the behavior of the helicopter was consistent with a total release of the controls right after touchdown."

I leaned back against the seat cushions, feeling exactly like a nine-year-old who had just had a firecracker go off in his hand (which I once was). An ominous feeling arose that I might be expected to earn that huge hundred and fifty I'd contracted for.

"Lieutenant," I said, "I thought the pilot was alone in that old bird."

"He was. The mechanics who pre-flighted the thing testify that the cabin was empty. Examination of the wreckage failed to turn up even a single extra corpus. Nobody approached the aircraft after touchdown until the crash crews pulled him out."

"Was he shot from close range?" I asked.

"We're not sure, but we don't think so. He wasn't too badly

burned and the M.E. says embedded powder grains would have survived the fire. His flight helmet was carefully checked, and no grains were found."

Curiouser and curiouser, I thought. "Let's have a look at the wreckage," I suggested.

The old bird had been covered with tarps and was surrounded by a circle of sawhorses stencilled POLICE—KEEP OUT. A uniformed officer was in attendance. The three of us peeled off the tarps covering what was left of the nose section, and the nasty, fishy odor of four-day-old-foam, mixed with burned fuel, was exuded. The lieutenant had been correct: the fire had not been a bad one and the foam must have arrived promptly. I'd seen worse roll-overs in which the pilot's main injuries were to his pride.

"Has anything been moved?"

"No. Other than getting in with the foam and cutting away his harness to lift him clear, it's just the way it hit."

I scrounged a pair of coveralls and went over the wreckage. He'd obviously touched down with the right side of the bird exactly parallel with the front of the hangar and had rolled to the left, leaving the right side pointing straight up. I found a stick, and using it to scrape away the encrusted foam, I went over the structure aft of and

around the pilot's seat, looking for signs of a bullet hole. I didn't find anything conclusive.

Stein had been right with me. "I wanted to go over it," he said, "but I figured I'd better wait for an expert. Why were you poking around the copilot's seat and ignoring the pilot's side?"

"This is the pilot's seat. Chopper pilots fly on the right, not on the left like their fixed-wing brethren."

"Weird!" he said, shaking his head. Old habits die hard.

"May I talk to the witnesses?" I asked.

"Sure." He led the way around the hangar to the cement block building where we'd parked and on into a corner office, where I was introduced to a Mr. Purcell, who ran the place. His walls were adorned with framed photos showing him to have been a Huey pilot in 'Nam, and with an engineering diploma from a quite respectable school.

"I wasn't around when it happened," he told me. "As the lieutenant already knows, most of our people were in the shop, here in this building. We run a pretty lean operation. There were just two mechanics out in the hangar. They'd pre-flighted the bird and were required to stand by out there, with the crash truck, until after he was back down on the pad and shut down. One of them, Murdock,

actually saw it happen. The other, Clancy, was inside the hangar, in the battery shop. Lieutenant Stein said you'd probably want to talk with them, so I had them come in today, and I'll get them in here. Take whatever time you need, but I'd appreciate it if you didn't prolong it unnecessarily; I'm paying them time and a half for today, and I can't bill it to a customer."

The two mechanics confirmed that it had been a routine check-out flight. The bird had been aloft for about fifteen minutes, and Murdock had gone out when he heard the clatter of its return.

"He brought her in easy," said Murdock. "Flared over the edge of the pad and settled straight in. I saw her squat when the weight came on the gear; then I heard the engine start to idle down. Just as I was expecting the rotor brake to come on, she started to rock sideways, and you know the rest." We did.

The lieutenant and I went back out to the pad, and I looked around. In the direction the tail of the helicopter had been pointing there was nothing but bare ground for two hundred yards . . . not enough cover for a woodchuck. He saw me looking.

"We've been over every square

inch in that direction, all the way back and into those scrub pines, looking for an expended shell, or some sign that somebody had been there. Nothing."

"Even if someone had been—say, with a rifle and telescope sight—" I put in, "he couldn't even have seen the pilot through the tail end of the chopper. If he got off a shot, aimed by guesswork, the slug would have had to penetrate the main transmission to reach the pilot from that angle. That gearbox is better protection than the best armorplate made."

"Precisely," said the lieutenant. "You state the problem very clearly, Mr. P. Begins to sound as if you're up the same tree we are."

"Short of a gun concealed in the soundproofing and fired by radio, I'm at a loss," I admitted. "This comes on like something right out of John Dickson Carr."

We were walking, slowly and in silence, back to the car. I was mentally reviewing what had been happening in that cockpit on Tuesday when I stopped dead in my tracks. The light bulb had gone on.

"Lieutenant," I said, "let's take another look at that hangar."

He shrugged, and we trudged back to the corrugated iron building. The battery shop where Clancy had been was in

one corner of the place. Battery shops require good ventilation, and as I'd suspected, the side facing the pad came complete with a nice big window, easily opened. Clancy may have been in the hangar, but he could have watched the entire landing sequence.

"Let's go back to the car," I suggested.

When we were seated I said, "Lieutenant Stein, I don't know whodunit, but I think maybe I know how. If I'm right, you people better put the microscope on Clancy and Murdock and start looking for motive and weapon."

"If you're right," he said, "it'll be the best hundred and fifty bucks the Attorney General ever spent."

"Ever been up in a helicopter?" I asked.

"Never. Tuesday was as close as I ever got to one."

"Okay . . . in a machine like that old bird, the rotor blades are not rigid extensions of the hub, like the blades of an airplane propeller. In flight, while going around, they also flap up and down on built-in hinges, like a diving board immediately after the diver has departed."

"Save the aerodynamics for next semester," said the lieutenant, "and please get to the point."

"I'm trying. . . . When the

thing lands and the rotor starts to slow down, if nothing is done about it the tips of the still-turning blades would droop so low to the ground as to take the head off some innocent bystander. This is not considered sporting, and it's bad PR."

"So?"

"So," I continued, "these birds all have so-called 'droop stops' built into the rotor hub. They come into play automatically during rotor shutdown and limit how far down the blades can go."

"I'm patiently awaiting the point of the lecture," said the lieutenant impatiently.

"Okay, so here's the point: it's a fundamental rule with pilots to check that the droop stops have engaged before pulling on the rotor brake and stopping the rotor. To do this, the pilot has to turn his head to the left and look back and up over his left shoulder at the rotor head. This would have the back of his head turned toward the open right-hand cockpit door. . . . In other words, the back of his head would have been pointed directly toward the hangar at the instant Murdock says the bird started to go ape.

"What's more," I went on, "those old choppers are noisy enough—what with engine noise, blade slap, tail rotor noise, and transmission whine—that

if one of those two men had fired a small caliber weapon it's doubtful the other would ever hear it. It's less than a hundred feet from the hangar to the pad. Wouldn't take the world's greatest marksman."

The lieutenant looked at me for a moment. "Bingo, Mr. Pierce, bingo!" he said, softly.

The following Saturday was, if anything, hotter and muggier than its predecessor. I was on the ladder, beating on the leaky gutter, when the same undistinguished compact rolled up and the lieutenant unwound from under the wheel.

"Thought I'd avail myself of the pleasure of delivering your consultant's fee personally, and tell you what we found out."

I steered him into the kitchen and yelled for the boss. I broke out three Chinese beers from the box and handed them round. If you're a beer person and haven't tried it, you should. The lieutenant, an ex-navy man, stood, saluted, and gravely addressed me as COMSIXPAC, a kind of dumb navy in-joke. The three of us sat down in the boss's sunny and immaculate domain, and I scabbled in the drawer for a pen to endorse the check.

"Lieutenant Stein, sir! There's been a mistake. This check is made out for two hundred dol-

lars . . . I was given to understand it would be a hundred and fifty."

He grinned. "No mistake. When he heard it was all coming back to the fund, the captain had it made out that way. The old f . . . fellow has quite a bit of latitude, and you saved us thousands in expenses."

"Should I infer from that the apprehension of the culprit?"

He turned to the boss. "Would you interpret for a poor bobby?"

He turned back to me. "As I said a week ago, Mr. Pierce, bingo! After you aimed us, we did, in fact, put the microscope on those two mechanics, and on the pilot, too. On Murdock, all we came up with was that he'd once parked in a handicapped space while he picked up a prescription for his wife. Clancy turned out to be a little different."

"Whatever would make one of them want to wipe out a common or forest-variety chopper pilot?" the boss asked him.

"Mrs. Pierce, that's exactly what that pilot wasn't. We started our checking with Mr. Purcell, the overhaul operator. He'd advertised for a pilot a year ago. This guy turned up. He had all the necessary tickets, and he told Purcell, 'I'll fly you anything from a Bell 47' (that's what you see on *Mash*) 'to a 747.' Purcell took him for

a check ride, flying the left seat himself. He decided this guy was the real goods, and took him on. The pilot was willing to work cheap, which cuts some ice with small operators like Purcell.

"The Feds traced our pilot to Dade County, Florida. That's where incoming drug traffic is threatening tourism for the spot as the Number One local industry. The people down there seem to think they have pretty solid proof that our boy was in it, up to his neck, flying the stuff. In fact, they were ready to bust him when he disappeared. Seems the Coast Guard down there has an accelerated campaign going, using borrowed choppers, and they're putting some small businessmen like our flyboy out of business.

"We also learned that he was up to his eyeballs in debt to the Organization, with little prospect of being able to pay off, what with the Coast Guard sniffing at his heels. It's our theory that this is why he split. He took this obscure job up here with Purcell, trying desperately to drop out of sight."

"I can fly, or I can run," muttered the boss.

"Ma'am?" from the lieutenant.

"I'm sorry, lieutenant . . . just some old English Lit leaking

out unbidden. I'm deeply impressed at what you all turned up in a week. It's nice to know we can get something from the Feds, other than missiles, for our taxes."

"Where does Clancy figure?" I asked.

"Okay. . . . Clancy was new at Purcell's. He turned up about a month ago, with an A. & P." (the licenses that bespeak an expert aircraft mechanic) "and impeccable references from two airlines in the New York-Newark area. Claimed he was born here (turned out true) and wanted to come home and slow down on account of ulcers (also true).

"His landlady told us he was pretty quiet, but had a visit two weeks ago from a couple of ugly types carrying a package. They didn't have it when they left. She picked one of them out of a mug book . . . an Organization type we know about.

"The Feds were able to contribute the information that Clancy had interests in the Apple other than Airframes and Powerplants. They had him definitely tied into the Organization, but couldn't say what he did, or for whom.

"To get this much took us until Wednesday. We speculated that our pilot had been spotted up here, and that Clancy was probably sent to deal with him."

People don't run up a big debt with the Organization and blithely disappear. . . . If the word gets around, it's bad for business."

The boss jumped him. "Lieutenant Stein," she said, with just a hint of her Bride of Frankenstein manner, "that's all plausible, but it's sheer speculation. From my extensive research in TV and the pulps, a whole month seems like an excessively long time for a hired hit man to function. Seems to me that's pretty thin for a 'bingo.'"

He grinned again. "You're probably right, Mrs. Pierce, I wouldn't know. Never came up against a professional hit man. The Attorney General says we don't have to be able to prove motive absolutely if we can show means and opportunity."

"Okay, my friend," I said, "what have you been saving?"

"Only that we have the weapon, and we have it indisputably tied to Clancy."

I looked at him for a moment. "Tell all!" I said, softly.

"The apparent accident was on Tuesday. It wasn't until Friday that we got the word it was a murder. Saturday you showed us where to look. If Clancy had done it, he'd have had no problem getting the gun off the premises. . . . People weren't being searched. All he had to do

was stick it in his pants and walk out. He'd had several days after that to dump it. Small chance of finding the weapon.

"Then I thought: That bird was about a hundred feet from the battery shop window, and Clancy must have known he'd only have a few seconds to get off a shot; one shot, and it had to be good. That's no job for a handgun, unless the shooter is a real John Wayne. This argues for some kind of a long gun. So we had another problem: How did Clancy get the mother *in*, without being noticed? 'Scuse me, Mrs. Pierce."

"Think nothing of it, lieutenant. It may not show, but I'm a mother myself. Pray continue."

"Okay . . . so what's the one sizeable object a mechanic can carry anywhere with no questions asked?"

"Of course! A toolbox!" I put in.

"Right, Mr. Pierce. I decided it must have been some kind of small but accurate breakdown gun, the pieces of which could fit into a toolbox. What's more, the thing was almost surely still there. We'd had our people there constantly since the event. While people weren't being searched, my men confirmed that anything as big as a toolbox would have been looked at."

"We're waiting patiently for

the denouement," I said, impatiently.

"There's this guy on TV who keeps saying how he loves it when a plan comes together. Well, I'll tell you true, I loved it when that gun came together. We still don't have it all, but we have enough. It had started out in life as a Contender."

"What's that?"

"A Contender is a single-shot .22 with a fourteen inch barrel. It's readily available with a detachable stock, and comes fitted for a telescope sight. Them things the public calls 'silencers' can be obtained to fit one on twenty-four hours' notice, no questions asked, if someone is of a mind. They've known the inside of more than one attache case.

"We found the pieces of the stock cut up and buried in the aluminum scrap in the sheet-metal shop. Parts of the frame were in the bottom of a can of waste oil. We never did find the tube of the sight and some other parts; he may have just sawed them up, put them in his pockets, and walked out with them.

"We got the telescope sight optics—carefully bagged and

put in the bottom of the case of the transit they used to align jigs. They looked just like spare parts for the transit, and could have lain there for years. Would you believe we got three nice clear prints off them? Clancy's, and he never got near that transit.

"The barrel turned up in the machine shop scrap can, under a little pile of lathe turnings. One of our people got suspicious: a good machinist doesn't turn a part so fast the shavings turn blue. There it was, turned down on the outside to look like a piece of scrap steel tubing, but inside the rifling was still there.

"We're checking the rifling in the barrel against the slug that took the pilot, but that's really just for form . . . we got him!"

The boss rose to her feet. "Lieutenant, I'm going to get you another cold beer. I can't think of a word to say, in the face of such sheer virtuosity."

"Treasure," I said, "the lieutenant is a navy man. In the navy they always have the word . . . damn the circumstances . . . it's required."

"COMSIXPAC TO LIEUTENANT STEIN . . . WELL DONE!"

MYSTERY CLASSIC

Persons or Things Unknown

by Carter
Dickson

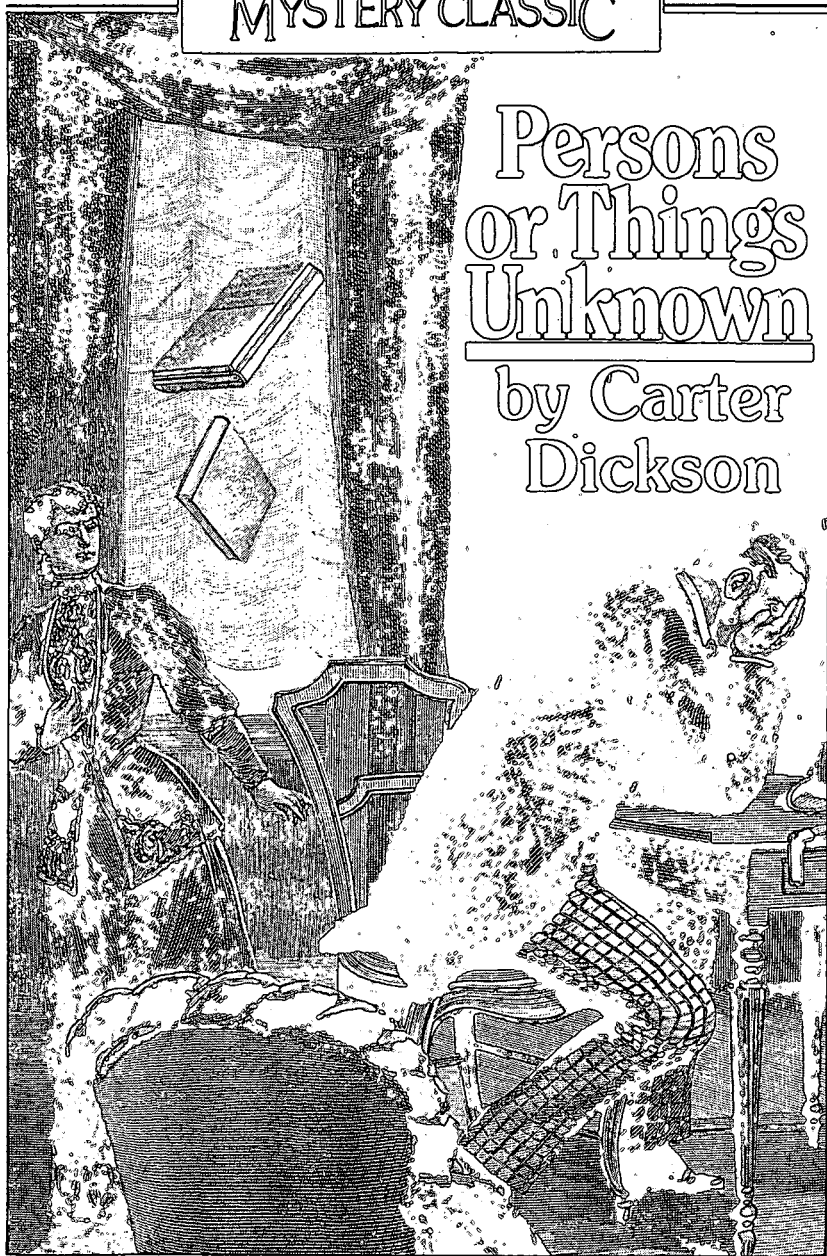


Illustration by Marc Yankus

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“After all,” said our host, “it’s Christmas. Why not let the skeleton out of the bag?”

“Or the cat out of the closet,” said the historian, who likes to be precise even about clichés. “Are you serious?”

“Yes,” said our host. “I want to know whether it’s safe for anyone to sleep in that little room at the head of the stairs.”

He had just bought the place. This party was in the nature of a housewarming; and I had already decided privately that the place needed one. It was a long, damp, high-windowed house, hidden behind a hill in Sussex. The drawing room, where a group of us had gathered round the fire after dinner, was much too long and much too drafty. It had fine panelling—a rich brown where the firelight was always finding new gleams—and a hundred little reflections trembled down its length, as in so many small gloomy mirrors. But it remained drafty.

Of course, we all liked the house. It had the most modern of lighting and heating arrangements, though the plumbing sent ghostly noises and clanks far down into its interior whenever you turned on a tap. But the smell of the past was in it; and you could not get over the idea that somebody was following you about. Now, at the host’s flat mention of a certain possibility, we all looked at our wives.

“But you never told us,” said the historian’s wife, rather shocked, “you never told us you had a ghost here!”

“I don’t know that I have,” replied our host quite seriously. “All I have is a bundle of evidence about something queer that once happened. It’s all right; I haven’t put anyone in that little room at the head of the stairs. So we can drop the discussion, if you’d rather.”

“You know we can’t,” said the inspector: who, as a matter of strict fact, is an assistant commissioner of the Metropolitan Police. He smoked a large cigar, and contemplated ghosts with satisfaction. “This is exactly the time and place to hear about it. What is it?”

“It’s rather in your line,” our host told him slowly. Then he looked at the historian. “And in your line, too. It’s a historical story. I suppose you’d call it a historical romance.”

“I probably should. What is the date?”

“The date is the year sixteen hundred and sixty.”

“That’s Charles the Second, isn’t it, Will?” demanded the historian’s wife; she annoys him sometimes by asking these questions.

"I'm terribly fond of them. I hope it has lots of big names in it. You know: Charles the Second and Buckingham and the rest of them. I remember, when I was a little girl, going to see"—she mentioned a great actor—"play David Garrick. I was looking forward to it. I expected to see the program and the cast of characters positively bristling with people like Dr. Johnson and Goldsmith, and Burke and Gibbon and Reynolds, going in and out every minute. There wasn't a single one of them in it, and I felt swindled before the play had begun."

The trouble was that she spoke without conviction. The historian looked sceptically over his pince-nez.

"I warn you," he said, "if this is something you claim to have found in a drawer, in a crabbed old handwriting and all the rest of it, I'm going to be all over you professionally. Let me hear one anachronism—"

But he spoke without conviction, too. Our host was so serious that there was a slight, uneasy silence, in the group.

"No. I didn't find it in a drawer; the parson gave it to me. And the handwriting isn't particularly crabbed. I can't show it to you, because it's being typed, but it's a diary: a great, hefty mass of stuff. Most of it is rather dull, though I'm steeped in the seventeenth century, and I confess I enjoy it. The diary was begun in the summer of '60—just after the Restoration—and goes on to the end of '64. It was kept by Mr. Everard Poynter, who owned Manfred Manor (that's six or seven miles from here) when it was a farm.

"I know that fellow," he added, looking thoughtfully at the fire. "I know about him and his sciatica and his views on mutton and politics. I know why he went up to London to dance on Oliver Cromwell's grave, and I can guess who stole the two sacks of malt out of his brew-house while he was away. I see him as half a hat; the old boy had a beaver hat he wore on his wedding day, and I'll bet he wore it to his death. It's out of all this that I got the details about people. The actual facts I got from the report of the coroner's inquest, which the parson lent me."

"Hold on!" said the inspector, sitting up straight. "Did this fellow Poynter see the ghost and die?"

"No, no. Nothing like that. But he was one of the witnesses. He saw a man hacked to death, with thirteen stab wounds in his body, from a hand that wasn't there and a weapon that didn't exist."

There was a silence.

"A murder?" asked the inspector.

"A murder."

"Where?"

"In that little room at the head of the stairs. It used to be called the Ladies' Withdrawing Room."

Now, it is all very well to sit in your well-lighted flat in town and say we were hypnotized by an atmosphere. You can hear motor cars crashing their gears, or curse somebody's wireless. You did not sit in that house, with a great wind rushing up off the downs, and a wall of darkness built up for three miles around you: knowing that at a certain hour you would have to retire to your room and put out the light, completing the wall.

"I regret to say," went on our host, "that there are no great names. These people were no more concerned with the Court of Charles the Second—with one exception—than we are concerned with the Court of George the Sixth. They lived in a little, busy, possibly ignorant world. They were fierce, fire-eating Royalists, most of them, who put the Stuart arms over their chimney-pieces again and only made a gala trip to town to see the regicides executed in October of '60. Poynter's diary is crowded with them. Among others there is Squire Radlow, who owned this house then and was a great friend of Poynter. There was Squire Radlow's wife, Martha, and his daughter Mary.

"Mistress Mary Radlow was seventeen years old. She was not one of your fainting girls. Poynter—used to giving details—records that she was five feet tall, and thirty-two inches round the bust. 'Pretty and delicate,' Poynter says, with hazel eyes and a small mouth. But she could spin flax against any woman in the county; she once drained a pint of wine at a draft, for a wager; and she took eager pleasure in any good spectacle, like a bear-baiting or a hanging. I don't say that flippantly, but as a plain matter of fact. She was also fond of fine clothes, and danced well.

"In the summer of '60 Mistress Mary was engaged to be married to Richard Oakley, of Rawndene. Nobody seems to have known much about Oakley. There are any number of references to him in the diary, but Poynter gives up trying to make him out. Oakley was older than the girl; of genial disposition, though he wore his hair like a Puritan; and a great reader of books. He had a good estate at Rawndene, which he managed well, but his candle burned later over his books; and he wandered abroad in all weathers, summer or frost, in as black a study as the Black Man.

"You might have thought that Mistress Mary would have pre-

ferred somebody livelier. But Oakley was good enough company, by all accounts, and he suited her exactly—they tell me that wives understand this.

"And here is where the trouble enters. At the Restoration, Oakley was looking a little white. Not that his loyalty was exactly suspect; but he had bought his estate under the Commonwealth. If sales made under the Commonwealth were now declared null and void by the new government, it meant ruin for Oakley; and also, under the businesslike standards of the time, it meant the end of his prospective marriage to Mistress Mary.

"Then Gerald Vanning appeared.

"Hoy, what a blaze he must have made! He was fresh and oiled from Versailles, from Cologne, from Bruges, from Brussels, from Breda, from everywhere he had gone in the train of the formerly exiled king. Vanning was one of those 'confident young men' about whom we hear so much complaint from old-style Cavaliers in the early years of the Restoration. His family had been very powerful in Kent before the Civil Wars. Everybody knew he would be well rewarded, as he was.

"If this were a romance, I could now tell you how Mistress Mary fell in love with the handsome young Cavalier, and forgot about Oakley. But the truth seems to be that she never liked Vanning. Vanning disgusted Poynter by a habit of bowing and curvetting, with a superior smile, every time he made a remark. It is probable that Mistress Mary understood him no better than Poynter did.

"There is a description in the diary of a dinner Squire Radlow gave to welcome him here at this house. Vanning came over in a coach, despite the appalling state of the roads, with a dozen lackeys in attendance. This helped to impress the squire, though nothing had as yet been settled on him by the new regime. Vanning already wore his hair long, whereas the others were just growing theirs. They must have looked odd and patchy, like men beginning to grow beards, and rustic enough to amuse him.

"But Mistress Mary was there. Vanning took one look at her, clapped his hand on the back of a chair, bowed, rolled up his eyes, and began to lay siege to her in the full-dress style of the French king taking a town. He slid *bons mots* on his tongue like sweetmeats; he hiccoughed; he strutted; he directed killing ogles. Squire Radlow and his wife were enraptured. They liked Oakley of Rawn-dene—but it was possible that Oakley might be penniless in a month. Whereas Vanning was to be heaped with preferments, a

matter of which he made no secret. Throughout this dinner Richard Oakley looked unhappy, and 'shifted his eyes.'

"When the men got drunk after dinner, Vanning spoke frankly to Squire Radlow. Oakley staggered out to get some air under the apple trees; what between liquor and crowding misfortunes, he did not feel well. Together among the fumes, Vanning and Squire Radlow shouted friendship at each other, and wept. Vanning swore he would never wed anybody but Mistress Mary, not if his soul rotted deep in hell as Oliver's. The squire was stern, but not too stern. 'Sir,' said the squire, 'you abuse my hospitality; my daughter is pledged to the gentleman who has just left us; but it may be that we must speak of this presently.' Poynter, though he saw the justice of the argument, went home disturbed.

"Now, Gerald Vanning was not a fool. I have seen his portrait, painted a few years later when periwigs came into fashion. It is a shiny, shrewd, razorish kind of face. He had some genuine classical learning, and a smattering of scientific monkey-tricks, the new toy of the time. But, above all, he had foresight. In the first place, he was genuinely smitten with hazel eyes and other charms. In the second place, Mistress Mary Radlow was a catch. When awarding bounty to the faithful, doubtless the king and Sir Edward Hyde would not forget Vanning of Mallingsford; on the other hand, it was just possible they might.

"During the next three weeks it was almost taken for granted that Vanning should eventually become the squire's son-in-law. Nothing was said or done, of course. But Vanning dined a dozen times here, drank with the squire, and gave to the squire's wife a brooch once owned by Charles the First. Mistress Mary spoke of it furiously to Poynter.

"Then the unexpected news came.

"Oakley was safe in his house and lands. An Act had been passed to confirm all sales and leases of property since the Civil Wars. It meant that Oakley was once more the well-to-do son-in-law; and the squire could no longer object to his bargain.

"I have here an account of how this news was received at the manor. I did not get it from Poynter's diary. I got it from the records of the coroner's inquest. What astonishes us when we read these chronicles is the blunt directness, the violence, like a wind, or a pistol clapped to the head, with which people set about getting what they wanted. For, just two months afterwards, there was murder done."

Our host paused. The room was full of the reflections of firelight. He glanced at the ceiling; what we heard up there was merely the sound of a servant walking overhead.

"Vanning," he went on, "seems to have taken the fact quietly enough. He was here at the manor when Oakley arrived with the news. It was five or six o'clock in the afternoon. Mistress Mary, the squire, the squire's wife, and Vanning were sitting in the Ladies' Withdrawing Room. This was (and is) the room at the head of the stairs—a little square place, with two 'panel' windows that would not open. It was furnished with chairs of oak and brocade; a needlework frame; and a sideboard chastely bearing a plate of oranges, a glass jug of water, and some glasses.

"There was only one candle burning, at some distance from Vanning, so that nobody had a good view of his face. He sat in his riding coat, with his sword across his lap. When Oakley came in with the news, he was observed to put his hand on his sword; but afterwards he 'made a leg' and left without more words.

"The wedding had originally been set for the end of November; both Oakley and Mistress Mary still claimed this date. It was accepted with all the more cheerfulness by the squire, since, in the intervening months, Vanning had not yet received any dazzling benefits. True, he had been awarded five hundred pounds a year by the Healing and Blessed Parliament. But he was little better off than Oakley; a bargain was a bargain, said the squire, and Oakley was his own dear son. Nobody seems to know what Vanning did in the interim, except that he settled down quietly at Mallingsford.

"But from this time curious rumors began to go about the countryside. They all centered round Richard Oakley. Poynter records some of them, at first evidently not even realizing their direction. They were as light as dandelion-clocks blown off, but they floated and settled.

"Who was Oakley? What did anybody know about him, except that he had come here and bought land under Oliver? He had vast learning, and above a hundred books in his house; what need did he have of that? What had he been? A parson? A doctor of letters of physic? Or letters of a more unnatural kind? Why did he go for long walks in the wood, particularly after dusk?

"Oakley, if questioned, said that this was his nature. But an honest man, meaning an ordinary man, could understand no such nature. A wood was thick; you could not tell what might be in it

after nightfall; an honest man preferred the tavern. Such whispers were all the more rapid-moving because of the troubled times. The broken bones of a Revolution are not easily healed. Then there was the unnatural state of the weather. In winter there was no cold at all: the roads dusty; a swarm of flies; and the rosebushes full of leaves into the following January.

"Oakley heard none of the rumors, or pretended to hear none. It was Jamy Achen, a lad of weak mind and therefore afraid of nothing, who saw something following Richard Oakley through Gallows Copse. The boy said he had not got a good look at it, since the time was after dusk. But he heard it rustle behind the trees, peering out at intervals after Mr. Oakley. He said that it seemed human, but that he was not sure it was alive.

"On the night of Friday, the 26th November, Gerald Vanning rode over to this house alone. It was seven o'clock, a late hour for the country. He was admitted to the lower hall by Kitts, the squire's steward, and he asked for Mr. Oakley. Kitts told him that Mr. Oakley was above-stairs with Mistress Mary, and that the squire was asleep over supper with Mr. Poynter.

"It is certain that Vanning was wearing no sword. Kitts held the candle high and looked at him narrowly, for he seemed on a wire of apprehension and kept glancing over his shoulder as he pulled off his gloves. He wore jack boots, a riding coat half buttoned, a lace band at the neck, and a flat-crowned beaver hat with a gold band. Under his sharp nose there was a little edge of mustache, and he was sweating.

" 'Mr. Oakley has brought a friend with him, I think,' says Vanning.

" 'No, sir,' says Kitts, 'he is alone.'

" 'But I am sure his friend has followed him,' says Vanning, again twitching his head round and looking over his shoulder. He also jumped as though something had touched him, and kept turning round and round and looking sharply into corners as though he were playing hide-and-seek.

" 'Well!' says Mr. Vanning, with a whistle of breath through his nose. 'Take me to Mistress Mary. Stop! First fetch two or three brisk lads from the kitchen, and you shall go with me.'

"The steward was alarmed, and asked what was the matter. Vanning would not tell him, but instructed him to see that the servants carried cudgels and lights. Four of them went above-stairs. Vanning knocked at the door of the Withdrawing Room, and

was bidden to enter. The servants remained outside, and both the lights and the cudgels trembled in their hands: later they did not know why.

"As the door opened and closed, Kitts caught a glimpse of Mistress Mary sitting by the table in the rose brocade dress she reserved usually for Sundays, and Oakley sitting on the edge of the table beside her. Both looked round as though surprised.

"Presently Kitts heard voices talking, but so low he could not make out what was said. The voices spoke more rapidly; then there was a sound of moving about. The next thing to which Kitts could testify was a noise as though a candlestick had been knocked over. There was a thud; a high-pitched kind of noise; muffled breathing sounds and a sort of thrashing on the floor; and Mistress Mary suddenly beginning to scream over it.

"Kitts and his three followers laid hold of the door, but someone had bolted it. They attacked the door in a way that roused the squire in the dining room below, but it held. Inside, after a silence, someone was heard to stumble and grope towards the door. Squire Radlow and Mr. Poynter came running up the stairs just as the door was unbolted from inside.

"Mistress Mary was standing there, panting, with her eyes wide and staring. She was holding up one edge of her full skirt, where it was stained with blood as though someone had scoured and polished a weapon there. She cried to them to bring lights; and one of the servants held up a lantern in the doorway.

"Vanning was half-lying, half-crouching over against the far wall, with a face like oiled paper as he lifted round his head to look at them. But they were looking at Oakley, or what was left of Oakley. He had fallen near the table, with the candle smashed beside him. They could not tell how many wounds there were in Oakley's neck and body; above a dozen, Poynter thought, and he was right. Vanning stumbled over and tried to lift him up, but of course, it was too late. Now listen to Poynter's own words:

"Mr. Radlow ran to Mr. Vanning and laid hold of him, crying: 'You are a murderer! You have murdered him!'" Mr. Vanning cried to him: "By God and His mercy, I have not touched him! I have no sword or dagger by me!" And indeed, this was true. For he was flung down on the floor by this bloody work, and ordered to be searched, but not so much as a pin was there in his clothes.

"I had observed by the nature of the wide, gaping wounds that some such blade as a broad knife had inflicted them, or the like.

But what had done this was a puzzle, for every inch of the room did we search, high, low and turnover; and still not so much as a pin in crack or crevice.

"Mr. Vanning deposed that as he was speaking with Mr. Oakley, something struck out the light, and overthrew Mr. Oakley, and knelt on his chest. But who or what this was, or where it had gone when the light was brought, he could not say."

Bending close to the firelight, our host finished reading the notes from the sheet of paper in his hands. He folded up the paper, put it back in his pocket, and looked at us.

The historian's wife, who had drawn closer to her husband, shifted uneasily. "I wish you wouldn't tell us these things," she complained. "But tell us anyway. I still don't understand. What was the man killed with, then?"

"That," said our host, lighting his pipe, "is the question. If you accept natural laws as governing this world, there wasn't anything that could have killed him. Look here a moment!"

(For we were all looking at the ceiling.)

"The squire begged Mistress Mary to tell him what had happened. First she began to whimper a little, and for the first time in her life she fainted. The squire wanted to throw some water over her, but Vanning carried her downstairs and they forced brandy between her teeth. When she recovered she was a trifle wandering, with no story at all.

"Something had put out the light. There had been a sound like a fall and a scuffling. Then the noise of moving about, and the smell of blood in a close, confined room. Something seemed to be plucking or pulling at her skirts. She does not appear to have remembered anything more.

"Of course, Vanning was put under restraint, and a magistrate sent for. They gathered in this room, which was a good deal bleaker and barer than it is today; but they pinned Vanning in the chimney corner of that fireplace. The squire drew his sword and attempted to run Vanning through: while both of them wept, as the fashion was. But Poynter ordered two of the lads to hold the squire back, quoting himself later as saying: 'This must be done in good order.'

"Now, what I want to impress on you is that these people were not fools. They had possibly a cruder turn of thought and speech; but they were used to dealing with realities like wood and beef and leather. Here was a reality. Oakley's wounds were six inches deep

and an inch wide, from a thick, flat blade that in places had scraped the bone. But there wasn't any such blade, and they knew it.

"Four men stood in the door and held lights while they searched for that knife (if there was such a thing): and they didn't find it. They pulled the room to pieces; and they didn't find it. Nobody could have whisked it out, past the men in the door. The windows didn't open, being set into the wall like panels, so nobody could have got rid of the knife there. There was only one door, outside which the servants had been standing. Something had cut a man to pieces; yet it simply wasn't there.

"Vanning, pale but calmer, repeated his account. Questioned as to why he had come to the house that night, he answered that there had been a matter to settle with Oakley. Asked what it was, he said he had not liked the conditions in his own home for the past month: he would beg Mr. Oakley to mend them. He had done Mr. Oakley no harm, beyond trying to take a bride from him, and therefore he would ask Mr. Oakley to call off his dogs. What dogs? Vanning explained that he did not precisely mean dogs. He meant something that had got into his bedroom cupboard, but was only there at night; and he had reasons for thinking Mr. Oakley had whistled it there. It had been there only since he had been paying attentions to Mistress Mary.

"These men were only human. Poynter ordered the steward to go up and search the little room again—and the steward wouldn't go.

"That little seed of terror had begun to grow like a mango tree under a cloth, and push up the cloth and stir out tentacles. It was easy to forget the broad, smiling face of Richard Oakley, and to remember the curious 'shifting' of his eyes. When you recalled that, after all, Oakley was twice Mistress Mary's age, you might begin to wonder just whom you had been entertaining at bread and meat.

"Even Squire Radlow did not care to go upstairs again in his own house. Vanning, sweating and squirming in the chimney corner, plucked up courage as a confident young man and volunteered to go. They let him. But no sooner had he got into the little room than the door clapped again, and he came out running. It was touch-and-go whether they would desert the house in a body."

Again our host paused. In the silence it was the inspector who spoke, examining his cigar and speaking with some scepticism. He had a common-sense voice, which restored reasonable values.

"Look here," he said, "are you telling us local bogey-tales, or are

you seriously putting this forward as evidence?"

"As evidence given at a coroner's inquest."

"Reliable evidence?"

"I believe so."

"I don't," returned the inspector, drawing the air through a hollow tooth. "After all, I suppose we've got to admit that a man was murdered, since there was an inquest. But if he died of being hacked or slashed with thirteen wounds, some instrument made those wounds. What happened to that weapon? You say it wasn't in the room; but how do we know that? How do we know it wasn't hidden away somewhere, and they simply couldn't find it?"

"I think I can give you my word," said our host slowly, "that no weapon was hidden there."

"Then what the devil happened to it? A knife at least six inches in the blade, and an inch broad—"

"Yes. But the fact is, nobody could see it."

"It wasn't hidden anywhere, and yet nobody could see it?"

"That's right."

"An invisible weapon?"

"Yes," answered our host, with a curious shining in his eyes.

"A quite literally invisible weapon."

"How do you know?" demanded his wife abruptly.

Hitherto she had taken no part in the conversation. But she had been studying him in an odd way, sitting on a hassock; and, as he hesitated, she rose at him in a glory of accusation.

"You villain!" she cried. "Ooh, you unutterable villain! You've been making it all up! Just to make everybody afraid to go to bed, and because I didn't know anything about the place, you've been telling us a pack of lies—"

But he stopped her.

"No. If I had been making it up, I should have told you it was a story." Again he hesitated, almost biting his nails. "I'll admit that I may have been trying to mystify you a bit. That's reasonable, because I honestly don't know the truth myself. I can make a guess at it, that's all. I can make a guess at how those wounds came there. But this isn't the real problem. That isn't what bothers me, don't you see?"

Here the historian intervened. "A wide acquaintance with sensational fiction," he said, "gives me the line on which you're working. I submit that the victim was stabbed with an icicle, as in several tales I could mention. Afterwards the ice melted—and was,

in consequence, an invisible weapon."

"No," said our host.

"I mean," he went on, "that it's not feasible. You would hardly find an icicle in such unnaturally warm weather as they were having. And icicles are brittle: you wouldn't get a flat, broad icicle of such steel-strength and sharpness that thirteen stabs could be made and the bone scraped in some of them. And an icicle isn't invisible. Under the circumstances, this knife was invisible—despite its size."

"Bosh!" said the historian's wife. "There isn't any such thing."

"There is if you come to think about it. Of course, it's only an idea of mine, and it may be all wrong. Also, as I say, it's not the real problem, though it's so closely associated with the real problem that—

"But you haven't heard the rest of the story. Shall I conclude it?"

"By all means."

"I am afraid there are no great alarms or sensations," our host went on, "though the very name of Richard Oakley became a nightmare to keep people indoors at night. 'Oakley's friend' became a local synonym for anything that might get you if you didn't look sharp. One or two people saw him walking in the woods afterwards, his head was on one side and the stab wounds were still there.

"A grand jury of Sussex gentlemen, headed by Sir Benedict Skene, completely exonerated Gerald Vanning. The coroner's jury had already said 'persons or things unknown,' and added words of sympathy with Mistress Mary to the effect that she was luckily quit of a dangerous bargain. It may not surprise you to hear that eighteen months after Oakley's death she married Vanning.

"She was completely docile, though her old vivacity had gone. In those days young ladies did not remain spinsters through choice. She smiled, nodded, and made the proper responses, though it seems probable that she never got over what had happened.

"Matters became settled, even humdrum. Vanning waxed prosperous and respectable. His subsequent career I have had to look up in other sources, since Poynter's diary breaks off at the end of '64. But a grateful government made him Sir Gerald Vanning, Bart. He became a leading member of the Royal Society, tinkering with the toys of science. His cheeks filled out, the slyness left his eyes, a periwig adorned his head, and four Flanders mares drew his coach to Gresham House. At home he often chose this house to live in when Squire Radlow died; he moved between here and

Mallingford with the soberest grace. The little room, once such a cause of terror, he seldom visited; but its door was not locked.

"His wife saw to it that these flagstones were kept scrubbed, and every stick of wood shining. She was a good wife. He for his part was a good husband: he treated her well and drank only for his thirst, though she often pressed him to drink more than he did. It is at this pitch of domesticity that we get the record of another coroner's inquest.

"Vanning's throat was cut on the night of the 5th October, '67.

"On an evening of high winds, he and his wife came here from Mallingford. He was in unusually good spirits, having just done a profitable piece of business. They had supper together, and Vanning drank a great deal. His wife kept him company at it. (Didn't I tell you she once drank off a pint of wine at a draft, for a wager?) She said it would make him sleep soundly; for it seems to be true that he sometimes talked in his sleep. At eight o'clock, she tells us, she went up to bed, leaving him still at the table. At what time he went upstairs we do not know, and neither do the servants. Kitts, the steward, thought he heard him stumbling up that staircase out there at a very late hour. Kitts also thought he heard someone crying out, but a high October gale was blowing and he could not be sure.

"On the morning of the 6th October, a cowherd named Coates was coming round the side of this house in a sodden daybreak from which the storm had just cleared. He was on his way to the west meadow, and stopped to drink at a rain-barrel under the eaves just below the little room at the head of the stairs. As he was about to drink, he noticed a curious color in the water. Looking up to find out how it had come there, he saw Sir Gerald Vanning's face looking down at him under the shadow of the yellow trees. Sir Gerald's head was sticking out of the window, and did not move; neither did the eyes. Some of the glass in the window was still intact, though his head had been run through it, and—"

It was at this point that the inspector uttered an exclamation.

It was an exclamation of enlightenment. Our host looked at him with a certain grimness, and nodded.

"Yes," he said. "You know the truth now, don't you?"

"The truth?" repeated the historian's wife, almost screaming with perplexity. "The truth about what?"

"About the murder of Oakley," said our host. "About the trick Vanning used to murder Oakley seven years before.

"I'm fairly sure he did it," our host went on, nodding reflectively. "Nothing delighted the people of that time so much as tricks and gadgets of that very sort. A clock that ran by rolling bullets down an inclined plane; a diving bell; a burglar alarm; the Royal Society played with all of them. And Vanning (study his portrait one day) profited by the monkey-tricks he learned in exile. He invented an invisible knife."

"But see here—!" protested the historian.

"Of course he planned the whole thing against Oakley. Oakley was no more a necromancer or a consorter with devils than I am. All those rumors about him were started with a definite purpose by Vanning himself. A crop of whispers, a weak-minded lad to be bribed, the whole power of suggestion set going; and Vanning was ready for business.

"On the given night he rode over to this house, alone, with a certain kind of knife in his pocket. He made a great show of pretending he was chased by imaginary monsters, and he alarmed the steward. With the servants for witnesses, he went upstairs to see Oakley and Mistress Mary. He bolted the door. He spoke pleasantly to them. When he had managed to distract the girl's attention, he knocked out the light, tripped up Oakley, and set upon him with that certain kind of knife. There had to be many wounds and much blood, so he could later account for blood on himself. The girl was too terrified in the dark to move. He had only to clean his knife on a soft but stiff brocaded gown, and then put down the knife in full view. Nobody noticed it."

The historian blinked. "Admirable!" he said. "Nobody noticed it, eh? Can you tell me the sort of blade that can be placed in full view without anybody noticing it?"

"Yes," said our host. "A blade made of ordinary plain glass, placed in the large glass jug full of water standing on a sideboard table."

There was a silence.

"I told you about that glass water-jug. It was a familiar fixture. Nobody examines a transparent jug of water. Vanning could have made a glass knife with the crudest of cutting tools; and glass is murderous stuff—strong, flat, sharp-edged, and as sharp-pointed as you want to make it. There was only candlelight, remember. Any minute traces of blood that might be left on the glass knife would sink as sediment in the water, while everybody looked straight at the weapon in the water and never noticed it. But

Vanning (you also remember?) prevented Squire Radlow from throwing water on the girl when she fainted. Instead he carried her downstairs. Afterwards he told an admirable series of horror tales; he found an excuse to go back to the room again alone, slip the knife into his sleeve, and get rid of it in the confusion."

The inspector frowned thoughtfully. "But the real problem—" he said.

"Yes. If that was the way it was done, did the wife know? Vanning talked in his sleep, remember."

We looked at each other. The historian's wife, after a glance round, asked the question that was in our minds.

"And what was the verdict of *that* inquest?"

"Oh, that was simple," said our host. "Death by misadventure, from falling through a window while drunk and cutting his throat on the glass. Somebody observed that there were marks of heels on the board floor as though he might have been dragged there, but this wasn't insisted on. Mistress Mary lived on in complete happiness, and died at the ripe age of eighty-six, full of benevolence and sleep. These are natural explanations. Everything is natural. There's nothing wrong with that little room at the head of the stairs. It's been turned into a bedroom now; I assure you it's comfortable; and anyone who cares to sleep there is free to do so. But at the same time—"

"Quite," we said.

SOLUTION TO THE MID-DECEMBER "UNSOLVED":

Burt stole the answer key.

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon

Photo by Maxine Gombert



E.V. CUNNINGHAM

If you're looking for stocking stuffers for fellow mystery buffs, I've a suggestion. Dell has just reissued four of E.V. Cunningham's Masao Masuto tales in paperback, while Delacorte Press has recently published a new title in the series in hardcover (\$11.95, 181 pp.) called *The Case of the Murdered Mackenzie*. That means that five of the seven Masuto books should be readily available, fitting into holiday stockings without bursting the seams of holiday budgets.

Fans of Cunningham's Masuto mysteries probably don't need to be told that their author is none other than Howard Fast, a prolific novelist of bestselling non-mystery titles. As far as I know, the estimable Masuto

made his first appearance in 1967 in a book called *Samantha*. (Look for it as *The Case of the Angry Actress* in Dell's paperback edition.) There seems to have been a lapse of years before Masuto returned, but even from that first appearance it was obvious that Masao Masuto deserved his own series—and that it could take dozens of books to plumb the depths of this intriguing detective's character.

Masuto is a nisei, an American-born Japanese who's married to a Japanese woman named Kati; he's the father of two children. He's also a Zen Buddhist who has set aside a small meditation room in his modest suburban Los Angeles home. And finally, Masao Ma-

suto is a detective on the tiny police force of Beverly Hills, California. Homicide's not commonplace in this wealthy enclave. But it does happen, and when it does, Masuto is assigned to it. So far he's never failed to solve a case.

Because the setting is Beverly Hills, there's lots of money, showbiz, scandal, and other upscale titillations here. Through this fantasyland of exclusive homes walks Masuto. He's a calm man whose Zen studies have taught him to trust his intuition; his philosophy also helps him live in a middle-class suburb and work in the mansions of millionaires. It is his karma, he says, to be a policeman, and certainly his meditations appear to heighten his insights into the minds and hearts of murderers—to such an extent that he often makes uncanny predictions about what will happen next, long before he's able to prove whodunit. On occasion, this has made his counterparts in the LAPD suspect *him* of the crimes. Through it all, Masao is staunchly supported by his loyal partner, Sy Beckman (“the other half” of the Beverly Hills homicide division), and their grumpy chief. Other regulars in the series include Masao's wife Kati, a traditional Japanese wife who begins changing once she starts attending consciousness-raising

groups; and Beverly Hills' part-time M.E., Dr. Sam Baxter, “a professionally nasty internist in his late sixties” who resents the fact that the division won't hire him as a regular medical examiner on a full-time basis. All of these characters provide interesting and often amusing foils to Masao.

Best of all, perhaps, are the books' plots. Cunningham has devised some devious puzzles for his Zen Buddhist detective. *The Case of the Angry Actress*, for example, initially seems to be about the shooting death of a middle-aged film producer, a retaliation for a shameful deed done eleven years earlier. A second death appears to confirm this theory, and a search begins for the young actress involved in that long-ago episode. But there's more to the story than this; a wonderful twist almost obscures a much plainer motive.

The past also plays a crucial, bitter role in *The Case of the Poisoned Eclairs*. While *Actress* exposed the seamy, casting-couch practices of Hollywood film executives, *Eclairs* focuses on four typical Hollywood wives: divorced, rich, bored. A mysterious gift of pastries is sent to one of their social gatherings, which proves to be deadly to the housemaid. Masao must figure out who was the intended victim, as well as handle the

women themselves. One of them dies before the others believe in the danger, and suddenly the shallowness of their lives—the absence of children and spouse, the time and money spent on their looks and leisure-time activities—appears to increase their jeopardy, rather than their security. The truth, revealed by Masao, shatters the women's illusions—and forces a harsher reality on them than they have ever known before.

My favorite one, I think, is *The Case of the Sliding Pool*. March rains flood a Beverly Hills back yard, and cause a swimming pool to slide down the hillside. A thirty-year-old skeleton is discovered beneath the pool's foundation; it was murder, so Masuto and Beckman are assigned to the case. Not only is the premise intriguing, but there is attention

here to Masao's relationships: to his wife; to their respective Japanese families, even to Masuto's chief. Pressure is brought from all sides to drop the case, and Masao's beloved family is even threatened. Finally, there's a compelling Japanese character, Kati's uncle, who challenges Masao's faith—as a Japanese-American, a Zen Buddhist, and as a policeman. This one sizzles with keen psychology and heart-stopping action.

Also available in paperback is *The Case of the Kidnapped Angel* (with yet another plot twist), and we can hope that Dell will soon reissue *The Case of the One Penny Orange* and *The Case of the Russian Diplomat* as well. Pick up a couple for yourself while you're out shopping for gifts, and let the holiday cheer begin at home.

MYSTERY REVIEWS

Vietnam veteran Reid Bennett has left behind the violence common in his job while he was a member of the Canadian metropolitan police force in Toronto, to become chief of police (and the only full-time member of the force) in Murphy's Harbor, a small resort town near the big city. Usually he has little more to do than arrest a brawling drunk, but a boating accident opens **Dead in the Water** (Bantam Books, \$2.50, 160 pp.) and begins a fast and furious chain of events wherein violence once again erupts in Bennett's life. This was Ted Wood's first novel, and he's followed it up with **Murder on Ice** (Scribner's, \$12.95, 182 pp.), another escapade for Bennett. This one, set in the hazardous blizzards of wintertime Canada, may be a bit grisly for some tastes. But Bennett is a hero to root for, and there's non-stop suspense and a strong sense of milieu.

Amos McGuffin is Robert Upton's dipsomaniac P.I., and **Fade Out** is the latest book in the series (The Viking Press, \$13.95, 194 pp.). If you're looking for a very human—and very humorous—hero, Amos may be your man. This one's set in L.A., and the case takes Amos from beach to barrio, corner drugstore to corner drug dealer, and—of course—inside the movie colony. This is Hollywood, after all.

Actress Jocelyn O'Rourke debuted as a detective in *Murder on Cue*. Now Jane Dentinger has recast Jocelyn in **First Hit of the Season**, which is definitely "SRO." In it, a nasty New York critic is "snuffed" when he sniffs poisoned cocaine. (Doubleday Crime Club, \$11.95, 179 pp.)

Author Gerald Petievich has spent fourteen years as a Special Agent of the U.S. Secret Service in the Treasury Department. It's no small coincidence, then, that **To Live and Die in L.A.** presents a tough, totally believable portrait of three T-men on the job. All are after a well-known counterfeiter who has always managed to elude conviction. All are driven to extremes—and all find their lives dramatically changed by the chase. A tale that is on the money. (Arbor House, \$14.95, 271 pp.)

On a much lighter note, **The Convivial Codfish** brings back Charlotte MacLeod's witty Max Bittersohn and his zany family-by-marriage. In this tale, irascible Uncle Jeremy (who could be a reincarnation of Alexander Woollcott—or at least forever trying out for the lead in *The Man Who Came to Dinner*) orders Max to find the culprit who lifted from his neck the Great Chain of the Convivial Codfish (which is, by the way, a private and very silly club). Get the idea? Pick up this one if you're feeling very whimsical, and tolerant of nonsensical fun. (Doubleday Crime Club, \$11.95, 177 pp.)

The Sourdough Wars by Julie Smith brings back her self-described "Jewish feminist lawyer," Rebecca Schwartz, to solve another murder. This time it's the new boyfriend of her friend and law partner who's killed on the eve of an auction the two women lawyers were holding for him. As heir to a bankrupted bakery, he was selling off the "starter" to his parents' famous sourdough bread. Schwartz is smart and sassy, San Francisco makes a charming backdrop, and the frozen-sourdough-starter twist is a fresh one (pun intended). (Walker and Company, \$12.95, 180 pp.)

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by Peter Shaw



The Return of Martin Guerre, which is based on a true story of mistaken identity in a sixteenth century French village, has been having a long run at art houses. Some nine years after Martin Guerre has abandoned his wife and infant son, a man shows up claiming to be him. He moves in with the family, life is resumed, and the couple have two children together.

If the viewer is aware that the story is going to turn on a challenge to the returned man's identity, his arrival makes a fascinating study. Nearly everyone recognizes him when he walks into the village, and he is able to identify most of those who come up to him, including his long-suffering, loyal, and still attractive wife. But is it possible that she accepts him in order to have a husband

again? This suspicion arises later when Pierre Guerre, Martin's uncle, has a dispute over property with the returned man and seizes the opportunity to accuse him of being an impostor.

How to tell? This is the 1550's, and there are no fingerprints, dental records, blood types, or other means of establishing identity. (Portraits exist, but not among the peasants; likewise, handwriting comparisons are possible, but not when people cannot even sign their names.) The cobbler knows the truth because he keeps forms of everyone's feet in the village, but he doesn't get to testify until the trial at the end. There, another Martin Guerre turns up, limping on a wooden leg and claiming to have been wounded in the wars. The judges have to decide which one is genuine,

and which must be hanged for violating the sanctity of marriage.

The moviemakers are not quite able to sustain the suspense right up to the end. But the psychology of the wife remains a fascinating study. Does *she* know which Martin Guerre is which?

A book on the subject worth the attention of mystery fans has recently been published by the historian Natalie Zemon Davis. Also titled *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Harvard University Press, \$5.95), it is based on an account of the case written at the time by the examining magistrate. (Previously there was a novel in 1941, *The Wife of Martin Guerre*, by Janet Lewis.) The Davis book shows how much of a puzzle the case presented. Numerous witnesses made identifications according to Martin Guerre's remembered scars and moles, but no two witnesses pointed to these features in the same place on his body.

The rules of evidence were remarkably scientific in sixteenth century France: hearsay was mistrusted; witnesses without a stake in the outcome of a trial were given special weight; the identifications of close relatives were preferred over those of neighbors. Yet in the Martin Guerre case it was the hearsay that proved true,



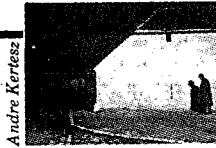
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Gerard Depardieu (l.) in
The Return of Martin Guerre.

and the most reliable witnesses that were wrong. The more convincing of the two Martin Guerres, furthermore, proved to be the impostor.

The movie reveals that the wife knew all along which was her true husband, but the book shows how this fact can be deduced from a careful reading of the evidence. The movie solves the mystery of how the impostor's testimony could fool the judges by telling us that the two met and confided in one another while in the army. But in the book we learn that they fought on opposite sides, and so probably never met before the trial. It was no wonder that the impostor was suspected of witchcraft. He had transformed himself into another man so thoroughly as to become by far the more convincing Martin Guerre.

THE STORY THAT WON



Andre Kertesz

The September Mysterious Photograph contest (photo above) was won by David R. Tarvin of Pana, Illinois. Honorable mentions go to Len Overcash of Joliet, Illinois; Tim Thompson of Waterloo, Iowa; Leigh Mattern of Lakewood, Ohio; C. L. McClain of Chicago, Illinois; Cindy Doerr of Edgerton, Wisconsin; Ellane Michael of Owosso, Michigan; Kathy G. Brandenberg of El Centro, California; Richard Ciciarelli of Phelps, New York; Ron Cozart of Pomeroy, Ohio; Shirley A. Green of El Cajon, California; M. L. Jenkins of Fairmont, W. Virginia; Johanna Boggero of Fresno, Ca.

THE SHADOW or, ON THE TRAIL OF DARKNESS

by David R. Tarvin

"The Shadow knows!" I said to my superior officer, Captain Flynn of Homicide.

"I don't know nothing," the shadow whined. The denial was tantamount to a confession.

"You used a double negative," I accused. "What you really said was that you do know something." The captain agreed with my reasoning.

"Use whatever means necessary to make him talk," ordered Flynn. He turned his back so as not to witness the brutal interrogation.

I whipped out my penlight, switching it on. "Lead me to the crime," I said, bringing the penlight to bear on the shadow's throat. Though dim, the light faded the throat considerably. "I'll use this on you one square inch at a time, until there's nothing left." The threat of torture worked.

"Follow me," gasped the shadow.

I followed him through the night, along the cobblestone streets, making sure that always a strong light shone at my back to cast the shadow out in bold relief before me. The shadow slunk and wavered, at times stretching out far ahead of me. I stayed doggedly on his heels.

"It's around this corner to the right," he said as we passed in front of a white stucco building. He tricked me. When we rounded the corner, the light behind me vanished. The shadow disappeared into the darkness. I called Flynn to report my temporary failure.

"But don't worry, captain," I said. "I'm staying here till morning. At sunrise I'll spot the shadow again. And this time I'll use the cuffs."

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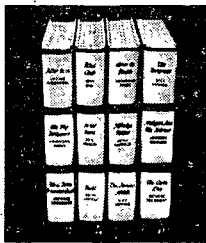
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to keep us cozy in them, thanks
for violins and cellos and
guitars, thanks for furniture
and paints and paintbrushes,
thanks for maple syrup and
leeds, thanks for park benches
and gymnasium floors, thanks
for fruits and jams and jellies,
thanks for shade for a Sunday
afternoon nap, and a special

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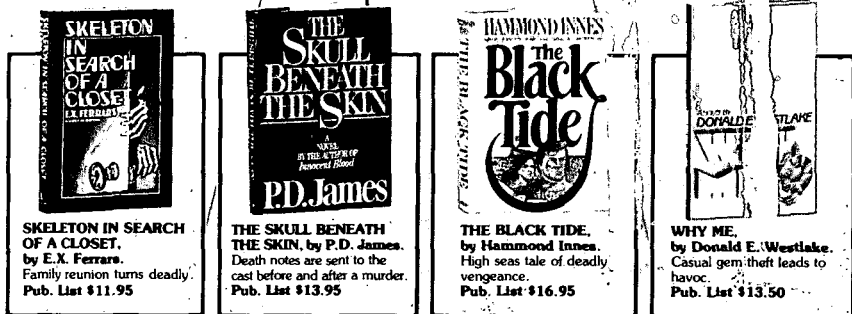
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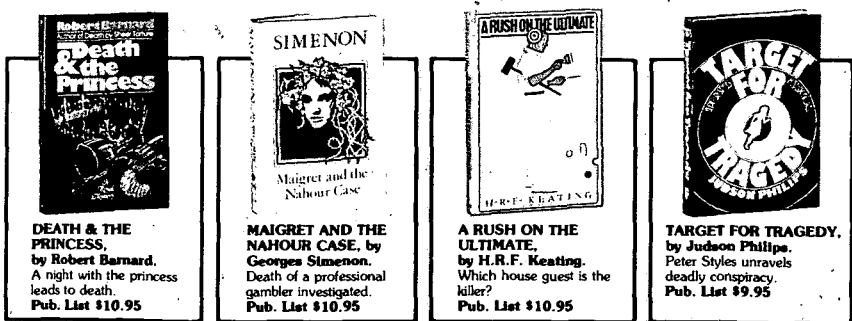
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